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*small town south*

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# small town south

*Sam Byrd*



1942

*The Riverside Press Cambridge*

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TO  
MARK CHERRY





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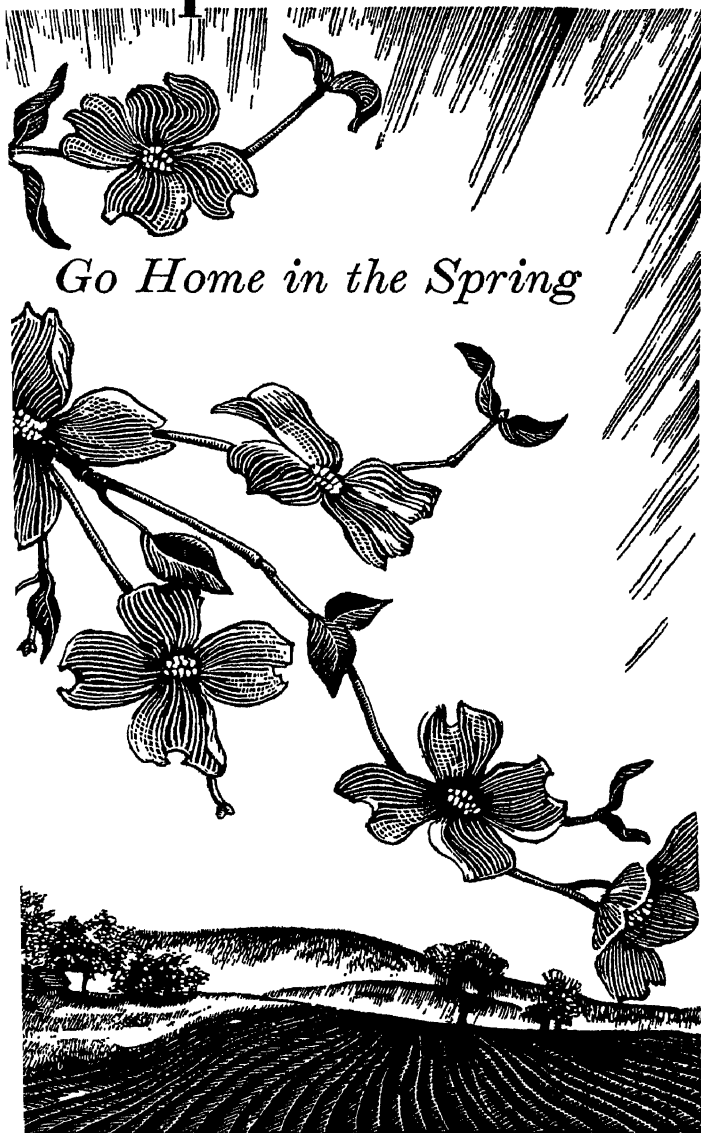
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*small town south*



# part one





# one

## *Mrs. Byrd's Little Boy Comes Home*

IT WAS spring along the river road and I was going home. The train rolled out of Goldsboro along the Atlantic Coast Line. A few miles more — a few minutes more. I leaned forward to watch the sun coming up out of the Carolina fields. Farmhouses — clusters of Negro shacks — a country church: familiar landmarks. A wagon drawn up at a crossing for us to pass. Southerland's Springs. The patch of woods this side of Westbrook's farm, dotted white with dogwood this time of year, and the peach orchards at Brogden's in blossom.

Seasons trouping theatrical circuits and long nights in 'Tobacco Road' and 'Of Mice and Men,' I had imagined myself riding home on the morning train like this. Two nights before, I had left a darkened stage door and walked over to the heart of Times Square and sat down at Father Duffy's feet to survey Broadway with a homesick eye. Douglas Leigh's neon roses climbed like rockets to the sky, but my spirits were earthbound. Soft-coal cinders lodged under my eyelids and scratched them red and blew away in the March wind. My head



ached with the symphonies of ringing telephone bells — stage hands' voices — shouting truck-drivers. Jargon — clatter — ballyhoo. Dress rehearsals — previews — benefits. Stuff for scrapbooks. Well, pile it high on cotton-bale biers and bury it with John Henry and Julie Anne. Give it an eighty-five-thousand-dollar funeral and sing it into the Kingdom. Get Paul Robeson to grieve for it at fifteen hundred dollars a week, because it was spring in Carolina and Mrs. Byrd's little boy was going home.

I glanced down at the Richmond paper in my lap. It appeared to a columnist who signed himself the Cavalier that it had been a great year for persimmons. 'But,' he went on, 'we have grown to be a wasteful and improvident people and our fine persimmon crop will probably be put to no human use. In my 'possum-hunting days I have often found the persimmon a veritable manna in the wilderness. 'Possum-hunting is a strenuous sport.'

Already, the flavor of things, the thought of things, was different. I tossed the paper away and leaned back with eyes closed and tried to picture how it would be when I got off the train.

Along Pollock Street groups of laughing Negroes would be going to work at the manufacturing plant. Bessie Pope would stop sweeping her front porch long enough to say good morning to Rolland Martin, walking to town to open up his store. There would be the smell of frying sausage in the air and the sound of children getting ready for school. Gidden's dairy horses would clop along the pavement towards Price's pasture. The sun would rise up over the top of the Presbyterian

church and spatter against the stained glass of the memorial window in showers of colored light.

Our house would be white against the spring green. The limbs of the oak tree hanging over the roof would be dusky from chimney smoke — brown veil over green bonnet. Inevitably a boy's bicycle would lie forgotten under a tree on the lawn, the handlebars rooting up the turf and its leather seat damp and sticky with the dew. . . . Yellow jonquils dancing a ballet at the edge of the porch and along the garden fence. . . . Tulips edging up along the drive and the weeping cherry trees and flowering quince like pink bonfires.

After I'd said hello to everybody at the house, I'd walk along Center Street and stop at Abb Pickett's stables and hear Mr. Abb tell about the time he ran away from home to Texas to be a cowboy. I'd hear Sam Thompson laugh again and listen to Nelson Ricks stretch an ordinary dove shoot into a wholesale slaughter.

Mark Cherry was gone — Mark Cherry, who had been to the town what Will Rogers had been to America — and Mr. Ricks and Doctor Steele and many, many more since I went away to New York to live. But Bob Holmes was there, and John Royal and Mr. Bob Southerland, and we'd sit in front of Lip Long's drugstore and talk.

Late in the afternoon I'd drive out towards Seven Springs to see old Ellie B. Cox, just as Uncle Cherry and I used to do. Uncle Cherry was gone, but Ellie B. and I could talk about him and about the times before I went away to New York when we'd drive up into the yard — Uncle Cherry bragging on Ellie B.'s wife and his children

and his chickens. After a while old Ellie B. would always say:

‘Mr. Cherry, how’d you like a little drink?’

‘Well, now, I don’t care if I do,’ Uncle Cherry would say.

‘Old lady, Mr. Cherry and I are goin’ out to see about puttin’ a little insurance policy on the barn,’ Ellie would shout.

‘But, Mr. Cox,’ she’d always answer, ‘you’ve already got a policy on the barn.’

‘Now, ain’t that jus’ like a dam’ woman. Come on, Mr. Cherry.’

‘Stay there, Sam,’ Uncle Cherry would say to me.

Mrs. Cox and I would talk about the chickens and the children for a bit, and presently, Uncle Cherry’s head would pop out from behind the side of the barn and he’d shout to me:

‘Hey, Sam, come here. Somethin’ I want to show you.’

When I got out to the barn there Ellie B. would be, just pulling out a big jug of brandied cherries from the bottom of his corn bin. Uncle Cherry would drink first, then Ellie, and then me. The brandied cherries were simply a jugful of cherries covered with corn whisky. You never ate the cherries, but drank the whisky. When the whisky was gone from the jug it was refilled with more from another. The second jug was like the first, with the exception of the cherries. After several drinks from the cherry jug it didn’t matter much which jug you drank out of and we never quibbled. You just sort of held on to your hat and drank.

We’d sit with our backs to the side of the barn, the

jug between us, and talk. Mostly about sin in this helpless world. There was a lot of Jeeter Lester in Ellie B. A younger Jeeter, perhaps, before things got so bad on Tobacco Road and when he still worked for Captain John. But there was more of Clay Horey, the pathetic, ineffectual little farmer from Georgia who was beset by that rascal Semon Dye in Erskine Caldwell's 'Journeyman.' On those afternoons when Uncle Cherry and I sat in the sun and listened to him philosophize about life, it seemed to be Clay I heard expounding that there was 'sin, sin and folks gone too far to help any in this life' and that he'd 'heap rather sit there than get up, and go out, and be bad.'

Along late in the afternoon, when the sun had sunk just about as low as it could without setting, Uncle Cherry would say:

'Hey, oh — it's about night. My old lady'll be gettin' on me. Come on, Sam, we've got to be gettin' home.'

We'd ride out of the yard with eggs for the kitchen and a bottle of wine as a peace offering to Aunt Amanda. Old Ellie B. and Mrs. Cox and the children would stand at the yard gate waving and shouting until we were out of sight down the road.

There is a sadness greater than homesickness: a sadness that comes of living alone in a great house after the echoes of loved ones' voices have drifted away on the wind. There's the sadness that comes of empty chairs and darkened rooms and the sadness that comes with remembering. Mrs. Murvin would know and I'd stop by Seven Springs to see her. We'd stand on her front porch under the tall white columns and look out over

the yellow river and remember how my mother and I used to visit her house at a time when it was alive and brimming with laughter and children and servants. We'd remember the smells of leather and tobacco and Bourbon in the halls — the smells of bird dogs and sweating horses, mingled with odors of frying ham and baking sweet potatoes in the fall air. Mrs. Murvin would laugh when she talked about how Julia, her only daughter, tried to teach me to call the owls that hooted all night in the woods along the river. Julia was fifteen then and had a beau, and I liked her because she wasn't stingy with the candy he gave her. She's married now and lives up the river in New Bern. Both of her children are older than fifteen and Mrs. Murvin would want to tell me about them as we walked through her garden and out to the gate at the end of the drive.

She would leave me at Ninth Spring up the hill and I'd go on through the woods along the river road to the Cliffs on the Neuse. They are tall straight cliffs, high above the river, and from the tops of them you can see miles across the cypress swamps and bottom land. When Gordon Cherry and I were boys we used to camp there on Saturdays and holidays when there was no school. We'd hide in ambush behind fallen pines and pop off invading enemy forces with our twenty-two rifles as our imaginations swept them around the elbow of the river in driftwood battleships. Once our withering fire almost nipped a real admiral in the form of a fisherman checking his shad traps.

There is a path that winds down from the top of the Cliffs to the river below. Halfway down, a lone pine

stands like a sentinel at a bend in the trail. Its roots have been washed bare by the rains and the trunk of it reaches cold and naked a hundred feet into the air, advance guard for the rest of the forest. But close down under the base of it, two twisting, coiling roots have fashioned a natural cradle and the tree has bedded it with pine straw. One afternoon years ago, there in the pine-straw bed at the foot of the forest, I had my first love affair. We were two children, scarcely in our 'teens, and how we happened to be there, how we managed to be alone, I have long since forgotten. But through the years I have remembered standing over her and looking down at her for a long time. I remember the confused, excited brightness of her eyes and that they were misty and flecked with brown and pointed like almonds at the corners. Her blue dress clung to her breasts, which were small and round like apples, and I remember the tiny drops of perspiration that broke from beneath the edge of her hair and trickled down over her temple. The only sounds were the murmurings of the pines and the coursing of the yellow river as it lazied along below us. When I knelt down beside her she gave me two little benedictive pats on my back.

There is a scene in the first act of 'Tobacco Road' where Sister Bessie Rice is first enamored of Dude Lester and draws him down onto his knees beside her to pray for him. Dude finds 'the pressure of her arms on his legs quite stimulating and exciting.'

The scene goes:

SISTER BESSIE

Dear God, I'm asking You to save Brother Dude from the Devil and make a place for him in heaven. That's all. Amen.

## JEETER

Praise the Lord, but that was a durn short prayer for a sinner like Dude.

*(He gets to his feet. Bessie and Dude continue to hold each other.)*

SISTER BESSIE *(smiling fondly at Dude)*

Dude don't need no more praying for. He's just a boy, and he's not sinful like us grown-ups is.

I had the feeling all through rehearsals for the play that right there, at that moment, there should be some slight response on my part — some small business of accentuation — some bit of reaction that I had not as yet got. I worried about it for several weeks and then on the night of the dress rehearsal, I got it. Just at the line, 'He's just a boy,' the memory of the afternoon at the foot of the pine tree and of the girl in my arms flashed through my mind, and as Maude Odell finished with 'He's not sinful like us grown-ups is' and drew me tightly to her, I, as though 'in benediction,' gave her two little pats on the back.

When I was fourteen my mother married again and we moved away to Florida. I thought of the night that everybody gathered at the station to tell us good-bye. Uncle Cherry put his arm around my shoulder and tried to take my mind off going away by telling me stories about how people in Florida wore linen suits on Christmas Day and how they picked all the oranges they could eat right off the trees in their front yards.

'Why, boy,' he said, 'with all the new things you'll see, time will pass so quickly you'll be home for the summer before you know it.'

But when the train pulled out I slipped down in my seat and hid my face against the window and cried all the way to Wilson.

My stepfather lived in Onora Valley, the heart of Florida's celery delta, and he and his brother traded in lumber and ran veneer mills in Onora Valley and up the St. John's River in Palatka. Their plants made boxes for citrus fruits and packages for the celery and lettuce crops. Years of working in the roar of the mills left him with a partial deafness. I remember him walking in and out among the rolling belts and whirling saws, shouting at the Negro mill hands to hurry them along with an order of crates, and one afternoon I saw him save a screaming Negro girl from being cut in two like a log by tearing her entangled dress off her before she was drawn along with it into the teeth of the saws. At home nights, he'd talk just a little above everything for fear he wouldn't be heard over the roar of the machinery, which still hummed in his ears.

When we moved to Onora Valley in the 1920's it was the celery center of the whole country and planters were growing celery on every available spot of land. The farms came right up to the back of people's houses and some folks grew celery in their yards. Highly cultivated acres of land along Celery Avenue, the main farming artery that shot straight out through the delta, were selling for as much as two thousand dollars an acre. Shiny white houses sat in palm groves at the edge of the Avenue like captains in dress uniform at the head of miles of marching green-clad soldiers. Farmers from the Carolinas and New York State were pouring into town



on every train. Florida was on the threshold of the real estate boom and the streets of Onora Valley were paved with pure gold.

That was before the boom collapsed and sent prospectors scampering back to their homes up North. Before I had gone away to New York, and before the fertile 'custard apple' land along the rim of Lake Okeechobee made the Belglade section of Florida the new celery frontier.

Well, when Aunt Amanda's good cooking put some fat back on my bones I'd ride on down to Florida for a visit with my old friends who stayed on in Onora Valley after the boom. I'd go bass fishing up the St. John's with Jamie Robson in his kicker. Brad Byrd and I would go rattlesnake-shooting in the palmettoes around Golden Lake, and the smell of piney-woods smoke would drive the last of the 'Tobacco Road' dust out of my lungs.

Outside the train window, it was full morning. We shot past Merrit's Crossing and as the whistle blew for home and the Pullman porter helped me on with my things, it suddenly occurred to me that I might have made a mistake. I remembered a night in New York when some people from home were visiting with me backstage after the show. I was asking them about everybody I could think of and one of them told about Norwood Page going off to Raleigh to drive a Greyhound bus. Two weeks later he came home for a visit in a new blue Buick sedan with two horns and a down payment. Everybody said it sure was wonderful the way Norwood made good in the city in such a short

time. Maybe I shouldn't have come home on the train. Maybe I should have driven back in a shiny new automobile.

It was a fine thing, a mighty fine thing, to be home and walking down the street talking to friends.

'Howdy, Miss Katie Lee!'

'Howdy, Miss Flora!'

'Howdy, Miss Georgie!'

It was nice to see that it hadn't changed much. You could still walk from the beginning of James Williams' cottonfield on the east side of town to Sam Martin's cornpatch on the west side in seven minutes, even if you had to halt for a spell in the middle of town to let the Atlantic Coast Line train speed through. You could still walk across town, east or west, north or south, in less than ten minutes and have plenty of time to stop and pass the time of day with old friends. A town that size a man can encompass in his mind. When you can climb up on the water tower, as I used to do every Christmas to help the men string up the Christmas lights, and can see every house and yard in town spread out below you, you're in a town where you can feel at home, because you can know everybody by his first name and be sure everybody knows you by your first name. It's the kind of a town I like — the kind of a town I'd been homesick for, for weeks and months.

Black Belle beamed while I breakfasted with the family that first morning at home.

'Mistah Sam, you suah is ravenous!' she chuckled, and filled my plate again with grits and ham.

'I sure am, Belle. I haven't had grits and ham for breakfast all the time I've been away.'

'Well, do me! You ain't had no breakfast *a'tall* up No'th?'

Any kind of a breakfast but grits and ham couldn't be imagined by Belle.

There is a pattern of life in small towns as well as big; the womenfolk have their morning work and the menfolk have their offices and daily duties. But in the small town the pattern can be varied more easily. Walter Cherry was in the middle of the season when farm buildings have to be insured and there was plenty of work waiting for him downtown. But it could wait. That is the nice thing about a small town down South. Almost anything can wait.

'I figure nobody's barn's going to burn before noon, so we'll just walk around and look, this morning,' Walter said after breakfast. 'A lot of people have been asking me when you were coming home, and they'll want to see you.'

So we walked the quiet streets and they hadn't, indeed, changed much — not in recent years. Not since I grew up; but now for the first time I realized the change that had taken place was a change from an older form of life, a life that ended or was ending about the time I came into the world. As a child I remembered the Westbrook place just coming to the end of its prosperity, and I was too young to realize the fullness of its heyday. In the years that had intervened the Westbrook place had hastened back to dissolution and I, coming upon it with an unaccustomed eye, suddenly saw it in relation to its former self. Yes, there had been changes, after all.

'A fine old family gone — all gone,' Walter said as we stopped a moment beside the lichen-green hitching-post. 'I reckon you don't remember much about the Westbrooks, Sam, but they were the big strawberry people around here in the old days. I came across that old Progress Edition of the *Tribune* up in the attic the other day, and it had a picture of this place. Three pictures — Westbrook's cornfield that used to yield eighty bushels to the acre, and Westbrook's cottonfields that yielded three bales to the acre, and Westbrook himself. I don't know what he yielded. Not much, though. He wasn't the kind that would yield anything if he could help it — he always had his own way about everything. He wouldn't yield when they told him this land around here was going to wear out and strawberries wouldn't grow any more. Well, it wore out anyway.'

Walter was right; the strawberry center of North Carolina moved thirty miles south in the course of a few years and Westbrook and the others of his clan were stranded. I dimly remembered the talk about 'strawberry centers' and shifting values of farm land, but I had never connected such vague movements with the personal fortunes of the families I had always known. Here was one concrete result: the old Westbrook mansion was an empty, weathered shell of gray frame, the magnificent barns in the lots behind the house were all gone, the white picket fence that passed between the twin magnolias was a straggling, drunken line of posts and broken boards.

'A lot of 'em went the same way — couldn't or wouldn't change,' Walter said. 'Let's walk down along

the railroad tracks and you'll see—the Rodney Knowles house, the Southerland place, the Prices' mansion—you remember that twenty-room house with four sets of white pillars?—well, they're all gone. The families, I mean. The houses are still there but somebody else lives in 'em.

'There was some talk for a while about turning 'em into apartments, but I don't know who'd live in the apartments. We haven't lost much population, but we haven't gained any, either, and nobody wants a big place like that.'

'Walter, I'd like to have one of those places myself, just so I could sit on the porch and rock. Remember how old Lubie Sutton used to be out there under his pillars rocking when the sun came up, and still there rocking when the sun went down?'

'Yes, I remember. That's what was the matter with this town. Too many people rocking from sunup to sundown.'

Well, maybe. If you make a career of rocking on the front porch you maybe won't get much done but you'll feel mighty rested at the close of day. It all depends on what you think's important.

'Hotel's going to fall in one of these days,' Walter said as we approached the old red-brick Southern House. 'Won't kill many people if it does fall in, though. I guess there haven't been more than half a dozen rooms occupied all at once since the Confederate Veterans' convention in Baybrook twenty-five years ago.'

A gray old man was rocking on the porch.

'Morning, Mister Charlie.'

'Morning, Walter.'

'Train be through pretty soon.'

'Yep, pretty soon now.'

'That's old Charlie White, in case you didn't recognize him,' Walter said as we passed on. 'He owns the Southern House, you know. He's another endurance rocker, except when a train comes through. He meets 'em all. I don't think anybody ever got off of that train here except you or somebody else from here who was coming home, or maybe a traveling salesman who wouldn't stay here overnight anyway, but Mister Charlie meets the trains, all the same. He just can't get it in his head that people don't travel by trains as much as they used to thirty years ago. And of course people in automobiles would rather drive another fifteen minutes and put up in Goldsboro and eat at the Coffee Shop.'

'Few years back Mister Charlie modernized the Southern House. He's got twenty-two rooms, but he figured it all out by mathematics and it didn't seem like even if he had all his rooms full more than eight people out of twenty-two would go to the bathroom at once, so he just put in eight. Maybe he was right, and anyway it's been a long time since he's had even eight people overnight.'

'God dawg, Mr. Sammy, don't give them New Yawk suits to the Crystal Pressin'!' a colored boy shouted as we passed the railroad depot.

'You remember Magnus Connor,' Walter said. 'He's got two good jobs now. Runs a pressing club and hauls the mail sacks from the trains to the post office in his delivery truck.'

'I guess most of the big stores you remember are gone — Ward's, Broadhurst's and Kornegay Brothers. People seem to want to shop in Raleigh and Wilson and Goldsboro instead of trading at home. Chain stores do the biggest business here, though Mossette Flowers and his daddy run a grocery store that gives 'em some pretty good competition.'

I looked for familiar stores along the business block. The Citizen's Bank had failed and the building was a café. The old Farmer's and Merchant's Bank space was a juke joint, and as we passed a lanky boy in a white jacket was beating time to nickelodeon music with a Coca-Cola bottle on the hamburger counter. Gone was R. J. Southerland, furniture; Allen King, furniture; and the Sandlin Furniture Company.

'Mr. Allen fishes, Mr. Sandlin moved away, and Mr. Bob is mighty good company,' Walter answered when I asked about them.

There was the old three-storey house that has the 'Lafayette spoke from this porch in 1825' sign on the second-storey balcony and the notion shop in the basement. Patterns, yarns, threads, samples of linen, and the oil-stove agency. There was the hardware store with a front booth of jewelry — one window, watches and down-payment diamond rings; another, stoves and flues. We passed the gift shop with the optician's office and the watch-mender's booth. We spoke to the dentist with the shaky hands who farms and 'politics' between appointments and stopped to say hello to the dentist who pulls 'nigra teeth' between trips to Hickory Nut Hill to spend his fees on corn whisky. Matthew

Hatcher, I noticed, runs a Chevrolet garage where M. O. Summerlin once made a small-town fortune in buggies, and the Ford agency occupies Claude Summerlin's blacksmith shop, where I used to stand and watch the sparks fly.

'I guess you'd call Shelton Taylor the new Ed Kelly around here,' Walter said. Ed Kelly left half a million dollars made in Negro real estate and bank stock to his nieces and nephews. He lived in a room in his own bank building and squeezed and pinched, and died a rich old man.

'Shelton builds rows of houses which cost him about four hundred dollars apiece to put up and he rents 'em to men working in his mill. He takes the rent out of their pay on Saturdays and that way he can't lose. He's got him a string of Negro houses, too. They cost him in the neighborhood of three-fifty to build and they rent for a dollar and a half a week about as fast as he can build 'em. They're good, substantial, sanitary dwellings, and it's a good thing for this town.

'A lot of big business still gets done with one foot on a fire plug,' Walter laughed as he pointed to a couple of men talking earnestly to each other at the Pollock Street corner. When you see two men huddled together over a fire plug, it's automatically an 'in conference' sign, and the session is not to be disturbed until they break for a Coca-Cola at the drugstore.

We passed a little colored boy and his dog. I stopped to examine a corncob cut into nine pieces and strung around the dog's throat like a necklace.

'Now, what's that for?'



'Distempuh.'

'Does it work?'

'He's alive, ain't he?'

'I gotta las'-go-trade for you, Mr. Sammy,' somebody shouted.

'What is it, John Junior?'

'Mr. Wootten Oliver said tell you "Howdy."' A compliment; Mr. Wootten Oliver hasn't spoken to anybody a dozen times in a dozen years.

Walter and I walked along Center Street to his office and sat down on the steps out front and watched the country girls go by. It was Saturday morning, and on Saturdays the farmers come in from the country to buy supplies for the week. The older folks visit with friends they haven't seen since the previous Saturday and the boys either shoot pool in the amusement parlor or take their best girls to the movie. But the unattached girls come to town to slink. For to them, to be glamorous is to slink — and slink they do. From eleven in the morning until time for them to retire to the family automobile in the back lot for the trip home. Young things they are, attractive, pretty, fair, but never glamorous. The younger children are clear-skinned, bright-eyed and fresh as the clean, crisp air of the Carolina hills. Like Ann Martin, with her yellow hair and her face like mountain laurel. But the majority of the older girls have blotchy complexions. Maybe from too much 'hog killing,' and again from ten-cent-store rouge, which they dab on in great quantities with little regard for cheek-

bones, contour, or color harmony. Hog meat and cheap rouge never made a glamour girl.

Negroes drift down the street, from the ten-cent store to the depot and back again.

'How's yo' baby, 'Liza?'

'Heavy and coarse, thank you.'

'Praise Gawd, ain't that Mr. Sammy?'

'Hello, Rachel, how are you?'

'Jus' fine, Mr. Sammy, jus' fine. I knowed the Lawd was goin' to show me where to get my quarter for prayer meetin'. You come home from New Yawk jus' in time, honey.'

# two

## *I Look for the Lesters*

SATURDAY morning around the Crystal Barber Shop and the Justice of the Peace, the fox hunter, the suit presser, the World War vet and the horse vet were giving Congress its daily drubbing. Any one of them could spot eye-wool as far as he could see it and while I was getting a shine, the boys were telling about the eye-wool a candidate for the Congressional nomination tried to pull on them when he campaigned with stolen marked ballots. He approached the fertilizer dealer with a plan for the distribution of the ballots, which had been taken from the County Board of Elections.

‘He had him a fistful of regulation ballots and he got Nelson off in a corner and said, “Now what we’ll do, boy, is give ’em these ballots, marked the way I want ’em marked, when we haul ’em in to the polls and you instruct ev’body to vote ’em and return us the ballots they get at the polls so we can mark ’em and shoot ’em right back in by the next load. Will y’ take ’em?” Nelson, he took ’em all right. He took ’em right up to the Board of Elections and Mr. Candidate got himself a de-feat and thirty days for conspiring to interfere with election officials in the discharge of their duties.’

Ben was doing an extra fandango with a rag on the left shoe. Brinson punctuated the election with precise strokes on a stop. The same old barrel-shaped stove in the back had weathered another winter. The hat tree managed somehow to stand, and the rows of green and white lotion bottles were as familiar as the regular and cheerful hissings of the steam presser back of the partition in the rear. Picture magazines and sheets of yesterday's *Raleigh News and Observer* were piled in the window, and the leather seat was slicked a brighter brown.

'Preacher' was shaving Doctor Herring close.

'Yes, sir,' he was saying, 'ain't no Prohibition goin' to stop a man from drinkin' who wants a drink, even if he has to make it hisself. I don't see as many drunks on the street since repeal. People don't have to slip it no more, they can walk right up and buy it, so they don't want it as bad. No, sir, Prohibition was a bad thing for this country.'

Back by the stove, Freddie Sutton and Lemuel Sasser had other things on their minds.

'A small town is a fine place to eat, sleep, drink and cohabit in the ordinary manner. That is, until a man reaches ninety and his glands shrink on him. Then you'll hear him moralize to the young.'

'Town's full of good women — wives whose husbands married 'em 'cause they couldn't get 'em no other way.'

'Don't I know. I had to marry mine to get 'er.'

'Hard-Tack' agreed, with a well-placed shot at the spittoon.

'Bet old Jeeter couldn't do that,' he laughed. 'Remember the time you and Walter and R. J. locked Bill

Hatch up in your store-box prison in the field and you all was scared to turn him loose 'cause you thought he'd beat you up?'

I remembered. Bill was the town bully and we *had* been afraid to let him out and instead we had gone home and telephoned his mother to go get him.

And I remember a night in Times Square when somebody touched me on the arm and it was Bill. I hadn't seen him in five years. Those were Prohibition days and bouncers in the night clubs were reported to be in great demand, so he bummed his way across the country from California to make a career as a bouncer.

I bought him dinner and gave him a seat to 'Tobacco Road,' and let him 'borrow' an old overcoat of mine. I don't know what he thought of the performance or whether he recognized the callous cruelty, the swaggering bravado and the slouching walk of Dude Lester as himself, because I never saw him again.

'I'll bet you never really saw any folks like the Lessters, now did you, Sam?' the barber shop crowd asked. I couldn't tell them that Dude's moronic laugh, a silly spluttering with half-opened mouth, was a direct steal from a boy they all knew. He came to see the show and visited me in my dressing-room. At first I was just a little apprehensive because I didn't see how he could fail to notice that I had been aping him.

But there is a vast gulf between the stage and the people who are not of it. He never suspected that part of himself was up there behind the footlights. He would never dream that a prosaic fellow like himself, with a good job driving a milk wagon in Washington,

D.C., would have anything that would make the big, rich Yankees laugh. He could see it in others, but not in himself.

'I bet I know where you learned to lean back and scratch yourself,' he told me. 'That's what old Cy Boon used to do — you know, the old Negro that used to walk the streets back home and shout "Wup, wup," to everybody. He used to do that, just like you do.'

'That's right. That's where I got that trick,' I said. And it was, too. 'I got a lot of tricks like that from people down home. You know that crazy little laugh of mine — plaaaagh! There was a kid back home used to do that. I don't remember who it was, but that's where I got it.'

He thought hard, but he couldn't remember, either. Finally, he laughed — plaaaagh! — and said I sure was a card, and departed.

'Well, I ain't been to New York, and I ain't seen your show, but why should I pay all that foldin' money for somethin' that we got more of right here than we know what to do with?' It was Henry Swinson talking, a red-faced farmer from near Calypso, who had been sitting over by the window, listening. I got down off the shoe-shine chair and went over and sat down beside him.

'You come with me, son, and I'll show you your Lesters. The crumbs of creation. These backwoods are full of 'em and the best place to see 'em don't cost me a dime. You sit on the grand jury, like I did, and you'll see 'em. They do wrong because nobody has ever told 'em what was wrong and what they do is just their natural impulses.'

Freddie Sutton and Lemuel Sasser left off discussing the thing on their minds and came over to listen.

'We tried a Negro for murder. Asked another one for a cigarette, he did, and when the other fellow didn't have one to give him he hauled off and killed him. No other reason. We sent a white boy to the reformatory and his father to the penitentiary. They was sitting in their automobile alongside a country store. The boy got out of the car to go over and speak to another boy and they got into an argument over a sixteen-year-old girl. They started fightin' and you'd a thought it was a cock-fight the way the old man started yellin' "Kill him, Kill him!"'

'Obeyin' his father, the boy grabbed a automobile jack and crushed his friend's skull. Now what can you hope from children whose fathers tell 'em to "Take your knife and cut their goddam hearts out"?''

'Hell,' said Flint Turner, who was waiting his turn for Brinson's chair, 'take old Dink Benson. He's a dog, now. Re-peal cut into his business some but he still makes the best goddam corn in this here county. Maybe it's the water in World Wonder Branch is purer, anyhow I'd ruther pay me a dollar for a drink of Dink's Deep Run than all this here ten-cent Hickory Nut swill you could pour down me. I'd hike down there for mine but I'm scared I might get my dam' tail-feathers blown out. He's a vicious son-of-a-bitch, that one. Some of us kinder quiet like asked Sheriff Mesner if'n he ought'n to do somethin' about Dink havin' him two wives. Dink's been married twenty years or more and his corn-field trampled all over with the wiriest bare-assed

young'ns you ever saw, when one day he come home from town with a gal he'd married in Kenansville that morning and said to his wife, "Here, take care of her and see to it that you all get along." Boy, you can imagine how they got along. Like two female wildcats in heat, and that made Dink mad and he said he'd fix 'em. So, on the far corner of the farm he built another house for the young wife and her kids and made his old wife stay on in hers and he divides his time between the two of 'em.

"'Dam', man," I said to the sheriff, "this here thing's bigamy." Well, Dan, that's the sheriff, he studied his mind awhile and then he said, "Boys, I don't figger Dink's botherin' anybody off his place. Ain't nobody down in Deep Run complained and if I took him in where'd you sorry rascals get your whisky? 'Sides, I'd ruther be a live candidate who didn't do his duty than a dead sheriff who did.'"

There were Lesters, then, and people knew them. Henry Swinson saw them parade by the grand jury. Bob Southerland's tenants pulled their houses down around themselves for fuel rather than go out and look for kindling in the woods. Bootleggers, sharecroppers — I saw a dozen Dudes. I saw Pearl the way she would have been if she had let Lov 'get in the bed with her.' Side by side they lived, on Lu Whitfield's place, less than half a mile from town. The Jordons and the Holisters. Broken-down families in broken-down houses by the side of a plantation road. I saw them from Lu Whitfield's car. A young girl married to the boy next door when she was thirteen and having a baby at four-



teen. I saw her walking down the road to the tobacco barns. She was every day of fourteen years old, with curly black hair sticking out from under a sun bonnet. She was barefooted and wore a loose-fitting white dress that clung tightly to her body, and she had a broom-straw in her mouth. She had an appealing, frank, open face, and was about as pregnant as a girl can be without being confined to her bed.

Lu stopped the car and called her over.

'Annie, come over here a minute.'

With no self-consciousness at all, she came boldly over to the car, the broomstraw stuck jauntily between her teeth.

'Yes'm, Mis' Lula.'

'Child, don't you know you shouldn't be traipsing up and down this damp road barefooted in your condition?'

'Law, Mis' Lula, don't you worry about me; I could make the house in a minute.'

'Where's your mother? Tell her to come out here a minute, I want to talk to her.'

'She's gone over to Mis' Goodin's.'

Miss Gooding was the community midwife.

'Tell your mother to come down to see me as soon as she gets back. Tell her I've arranged for Doctor Henderson to be with you when you get ready, and I don't want that Gooding woman around here. Hear me?'

'Yes'm.'

'Where's Ernie?' Ernie was her husband.

'Gone to Kinston to see 'bout some seed potatoes. He was 'sposed to git back las' night, but he didn't. I was sort of waitin' out here for him. He said he'd bring

me back some pineapple. I been wantin' me some pineapple mighty bad. Ma said it was always like that when you was havin' a baby, wantin' somethin' like that, and feelin' like you'll have a fit if'n you don't git it. Was it like that with you, Mis' Lu, when you was havin' Lillian, wantin' somethin'? I swear to God, Mis' Lu, I feel like if I don't git me some of them sweet, juicy slices of pineapple right this minute I'll go crazy, I do.'

Lula looked at me and made a little hopeless gesture.

'Annie, if I go up town and bring you a can of sweet, juicy pineapple, will you promise me to go in the house and sit down and quit running up and down this wet road like this, until your mother comes back?'

'Mis' Lula, I'll not only promise, I'll swear.' And with a swift leap that made Lu gasp with fear for her, she cleared the road and was up the steps and in the house.

She got the pineapple; and Doctor Henderson was there when she was 'ready.' Two weeks later Walter and I passed that way and I glimpsed her again. She was walking down the road toward the tobacco barns, her bonnet on the back of her head, a tiny white bundle in her arms, and a broomstick stuck jauntily between her teeth.

We rode on past Bert Martin's store at the Crossroads and down to a house in a field where a farmer wanted Walter to put fire insurance on a tenant house. His tenant houses had gone uninsured for years, but this year he had had trouble with his white tenants on the place and he was afraid they wouldn't be able to reach an amicable settlement at the end of the season and they'd burn his houses.

The farmer was away in the fields, but Bill, a tenant boy, was in the yard and he promptly called his landlord 'a dam' liar who tells another lie to cover up the first one.' It didn't look so good for the houses.

At another house we talked with a young girl whose belly was big with child by a husband who had taken her out of a sporting house in Kinston, where she had fled to escape the advances of her own father — the father, incidentally, of the two-year-old who peered out at me curiously from behind her skirts.

As I talked with her I remembered how William Byrd, II, in his 'History of the Dividing Line,' had written about the ancestors of this big-bellied girl — two hundred years before Erskine Caldwell had written of them. And I thought of the Columbia University professor who came to my dressing-room at the Forrest Theatre to study my trick of standing on the sides of my feet, a trick that was characteristic of undernourished, hookworm-ridden pellagra victims. I recalled William Byrd's lines: 'The Men, for their Parts . . . impose all the Work upon the poor Women. They make their Wives rise out of their Beds early in the Morning at the same time that they lye and Snore, till the Sun has run one third of his course, and disperst all the unwholesome Damps. Then, after Stretching and Yawning for half an Hour, they light their Pipes, and, under the Protection of a cloud of Smoak, venture out into the open Air; tho', if it happens to be never so little cold, they quickly return Shivering into the Chimney corner. When the weather is mild, they stand leaning with both their arms upon the corn-field fence, and

gravely consider whether they had best go and take a Small Heat at the Hough: but generally find reasons to put it off until another time.'

I looked at the dirty-faced child gaping at me from behind its mother's skirts and thought of the child soon to be born and I remembered the girl, Annie, and her craving for the sweet, juicy slices of pineapple. Two hundred years between William Byrd, who deplored the fact that 'by this bad Husbandry Milk is so Scarce, in the Winter Season, that were a Big-belly'd Woman to long for it, She would lose her longing,' and Erskine Caldwell, whose characters live in the same land; land so gutted, so drained, that they yearn not for milk to satisfy the cravings of their pregnant wives, but for 'stylish dresses to bury them in.'

'Now I'm going to take you by a place to see the people that came to my mind the first time I saw the show in New York. I've saved this inspection trip down their way until I knew you could come along because I wanted you to see for yourself. Old man Cowan makes Jeeter look like a dancing master,' Walter said.

We left the dirt road and bumped over two tracks that wound over the rows of a cottonfield. We followed a lightwood crisscross fence along the edge of a pine field and presently came to a stop by the side of a big ditch. Then I saw the house on the other side of it; a shack that leaned in the middle like a cake that had fallen in the oven. Under a chinaberry tree two hounds licked their sores and a scrawny Dominico rooster with no feathers on his pink rump scratched in the dirt under the doorsteps. In the yard by the well several hogs wallowed and grunted in a muddy pen.

Walter blew his horn.

'Hello, Mrs. Kate.'

Presently, Mrs. Cowan appeared in the doorway.

'Who's'at?'

'Walter Cherry, Mrs. Kate.'

'y God, Walter, be out'n a minute.'

I watched her as she made her way across the yard and over the ditch bridge of logs. She walked haltingly and I could see that her shoes were run down until she almost came out of them at every step. Her stockings were torn completely out at both knees and her dress was filthy dirty. Ten-cent-store glasses balanced miraculously on the tip of her nose and the side of her face and her arms were scarred from a burn.

'Mrs. Kate, I was on my way down to Mr. Alf Lawson's place to see about some insurance on his barns and I thought while I was this close I'd run by and see how Mr. Nick was getting along.'

'Wal, now, Walter, that's right Christian of ya.'

'Somebody in the office last Saturday said he'd had another spell and the least I could do while I was right here would be to ask you if you needed anything.'

'Couldn't take it if I did, son, 'count it might 'fect the re-lief money. Them nosey Moses' finds out ev'ry dime we gits and since Mr. Nick los' his temper and tol' the agent he acted like a dang Republican they just might like to fin' some excuse to cut us.'

'Oh, I don't think they'd do that.'

'Cain't tell. Wal, Walter, seems like Mr. Nick's been gettin' them fits in the head agin from the high blood. On'y yest'day mornin' we found him runnin' around in

the yard about seven o'clock, way a'ter daylight, with a lit lamp in his hand and he was shoutin' "Git up ev'ybody and build me a fire," at the top of his voice.'

By this time Mr. Nick had come out of the house and somehow or another managed to get over the ditch without falling off the logs.

'Who is it, Kate? They come to cut us?'

'Hello, Mr. Nick,' said Walter. 'I just dropped by to see how you are getting along. I hear you're spry enough to go to the dance at Dudley Beach Saturday night.'

'It's a dang lie. They just tryin' to frame me so's I won't get me my re-lief.'

'Pa, where's y' manners? Walter drove all the way 'cross the field to ask of ya.'

'Oh. Well. Sorry, Walter. Cain't see like I used to. Man's got to be careful with Republican agents tryin' to cut his re-lief ev'y chance they git.'

'Mr. Nick, this is Sam Byrd, home from New York on a visit, and I brought him by to say hello to you.'

'Well. Do.'

There was drool all over the man's coat. Glassy membranes clouded his eyes. His hat was a greasy rim above his ears and his trousers were torn and unbuttoned at the fly. Sores covered the back of the hand he extended for me to shake.

'Seems like Pa sleeps s'cold nights. We bought us two blankets on time for five dollars, but we couldn't pay for but one an' the man from the store come took it away. H'it'll soon warm up enough for us not to worry 'bout it for a spell, I guess.'

'What do you hear from Lubie?' Lubie was their son.

'He's still to the C.C.'s camp. He don't write nothin', though; on'y a slip at a time. He don't say nothin' 'bout his work or us, jus' asks a'ter his hogs and his dog.'

'Well, Mrs. Kate, it's good to see you both again. Take care of yourselves, now.'

'Don't worry 'bout me, Walter. I've got grit in my craw, I have. I can wear rags and feel good on the inside, too.'

Yes, the Lesters still live in the South. Too many of them. I wanted to see them for myself, and I did. But there was another, dearer, part of 'Tobacco Road' in the South.

One spring afternoon I drove south towards Charleston on a sentimental journey, a private pilgrimage to Beaufort, and to Maude Odell, my beloved Sister Bessie.

Maude died in her dressing-room in the Forrest Theatre on the night of February 27, 1937. I went to her funeral in the Actors' Chapel just across from the theatre where the show was running, and all through the service I thought of the visits we used to pay to each other's dressing-rooms in the early days of the play when we were both planning what we were going to do as soon as it closed.

Maude was always philosophical. After forty years of trouping there was still glamour in show business, but she had had enough.

'I've made up my mind this is my last show,' she

once told me. 'After this one I'm going back to Beaufort and lead a nice, lazy South Carolina life under a live-oak tree. It's just a question of whether I go sooner or later.'

Somewhere below Charleston along Route 15 in South Carolina I saw a sign that pointed the way to 'Beaufort — 22 miles.'

Suddenly I, too, felt homesick for Beaufort, just as Maude had. I knew all about Beaufort, though I had never seen it. Maude loved the sleepy old place; her girlhood there had been an idyllically happy one and on winter nights after the show, when our Southern blood chilled at the thought of the sleet and snow outside, we used to drink tea in Maude's dressing-room or mine, and talk — Maude mostly about Beaufort and her childhood.

Now Beaufort was only a few minutes' drive away, and I turned toward it. I wanted to see and love Beaufort as she had seen it and loved it.

As I came nearer to the sea I passed the deep marshes that had been dark with mystery in Maude's imagination, and the sea breeze stirred the moss on the cypresses and live-oaks. The night was alive with the clamor of marsh frogs and the stars hung from the sky like big white saucers. In my sentimental mood it seemed the very kind of a night that Maude would have chosen to come home, and I was glad that I could make the journey for her and see it all and love it all as she would have.

At the dim and high-ceilinged Sea Island Hotel, the center of so many of Maude's stories, I found lodging



for the night, and when I awakened the next morning it was as if I had lived in Beaufort all my life and was at home. I had no sense of strangeness or of having been traveling; it was all exactly as Maude had told me. In Maude's Beaufort the sun always shone clear and golden in a sea-blue sky, as now; the mockingbirds sang perpetually in the live-oaks, as now; the sea was a near and fascinating friend.

Beaufort is a little town and I walked unhesitatingly to St. Peter's Church. Maude's grave was in the churchyard; a simple stone, under a spring-blossomed crêpe myrtle, just as I had known it would be.

Maude Odell. Born 1870; died 1937. Maude had been older than any of us suspected. Older and perhaps tireder. She had longed for the peace and rest of Beaufort, and she had found them.

Sister Bessie. Sister Bessie who used to drag me down on the dusty stage of 'Tobacco Road' and pray for me.

'I knowed you would want me to pray for you, Dude. It will help you get shed of your sins like Jeeter did.'

As I stood there, filled with memories of Maude, an old man came out of the church and wandered down the path between the graves until he stood beside me.

I had felt myself one with Beaufort, but he seemed to know me as an alien — as, I suppose, all North Carolinians forever will be to the natives of South Carolina.

'Down to see the azaleas?' he asked, and I nodded. Along the Azalea Trail in springtime no one needs any other pretext for existing.

'Do you know, sir, who that is?' He pointed with his cane towards Maude's grave. 'That, sir, is Sister Bessie.'

Ever hear of Sister Bessie? Ever hear of a show they called "Tobacco Road"? Well, sir, Sister Bessie played in that show; she and I were children together, and she was the prettiest thing you ever saw.'

For perhaps three or four minutes he rambled on with his reminiscences. I could not speak; I was too full, brimming full, with emotion.

My silence, I suppose, finally piqued the old fellow. His voice trailed off, he tapped his cane impatiently; at last he stumped away.

I turned away, too. I wish I had left a moment sooner, before I heard him mutter, 'Damn peculiar Yankee!'

# three

## *Mrs. Southerland Requests the Honor*

HE ATTRIBUTED his ninety-odd years to a quart of whisky a day. When he got a little too much one Sunday night and passed out in the overheated Baptist Church, the congregation smiled and whispered to each other that 'Colonel Rouse had had a spell.'

The Confederate reunions were always held on Colonel Rouse's lawn and the speakings under his magnolias. Picnic tables for the occasions were made by rolling tobacco trucks together and covering them with snowy-white tablecloths. Mrs. Rouse and the Daughters of the Confederacy and a dozen Negro women brought platters piled high with fried chicken out of the kitchen to the Veterans and their families gathered in the garden. There was barbecue, cakes, pies, tarts, cookies, pickles, preserves, potato salads, chicken salads, hot biscuits, corn bread, cold slaw, steaming pots of Brunswick stew, iced tea and coffee. School children who had been rehearsed for the celebration by their teachers sang Southern songs under the Stars and Bars, and the president of the Children of the Confederacy presented Mr. Meritt, the oldest veteran, with a scroll. Mr. Faison

Arnold made the address of welcome, which always ended with his recitation: 'Let me live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man.'

That was the cue for the Negro women to clear the tables. The old soldiers retired to the benches under the latticed well house and spent the afternoon drinking lemonade and refighting battles and swapping yarns about the big reunions in Biloxi and Vicksburg.

I can hear old Colonel Rouse right now, telling how his Mammy saved the hog meat from the Yankees:

'Mammy, she wrapped the meat up in croker sacks and buried it under the grapevine. When them foragin' rascals come snoopin' 'round fer rations and sech, they saw the messed-up groun' and dug down into it. Mam' stood there watchin' 'em with her hog meat in their hands. "Well," she said, "you all's Yankees an' all, but I wouldn't want to see a dog die from eatin' meat that's come from hogs with the cholera." They didn't believe her, but after studyin' over it, they decided they'd ruther be hungry than dead, so they left it. Mam' warn't s' lucky with the hams. She put 'em in the wash pot in the yard and filled it with water, but the grease on top give her away, and they got 'em.'

We children who had been excused from school to sing 'The Old North State Forever' were supposed to be back for the first class period after lunch, but we wouldn't budge until we'd heard Colonel Rouse tell how the Yankees used to steal his Mammy's geese.

He'd sort of lean down over his cane and squint through his eyes at us sitting there at his feet.

'They'd squirm on they bellies through the grass and

hide in the underbrush 'til the geese come honkin' out o' the poultry yard. Then, they'd bait a fishin' hook with corn and cast it into the yard and when the crazy ol' goose would come waddlin' up to it and poke at it and swallow it, them dern Yankees 'd jerk they ol' hook, and jus' like that, they had'm dinner.'

Now the paneling between the first and second galleries of Colonel Rouse's house is trimmed in neon lights which spell out 'Funeral Home' in a sickly blue. A green canopy extends from the front porch of black and white marble squares to the street. When John Royal is home off his railroad run between Wilmington and Norfolk and walking home to dinner, he steps out into the street to keep from passing under the canopy. Bad luck, he says, to walk under a funeral canopy. If his companion is somebody who might think he is silly, he throws him off by saying, 'Why, lookathere, there's a dime,' and steps off the curbing to pick up a rock or something shiny.

Colonel Rouse's farm on the highway is gone. The 'one-fortieth of an acre' deeded to the Carolina Patriots Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution is a pigpen, and to see the stone marker that commemorates the all-night ride of Polly Slocumb, heroine of the Revolution, you have to climb over a wire fence and tiptoe through the mud.

The old man's den, where he kept all his books on the life of Robert E. Lee, is painted a funeral-home white, and the suave, smooth undertaker who owns the place dispenses burying-society tickets to the Negroes and the poor, and expensive caskets to those who can afford the best in underground novelties.

Funeral homes give me the creeps. One morning after I was home, I rode with a salesman friend of mine on a business trip to a neighboring small town. One of his stops was at the funeral home there. When the undertaker found out I had been living in New York City and acting on the stage he insisted on showing me all through his establishment.

‘Now take yourself,’ the undertaker said as he showed me through the family parlors; ‘you make your livin’ dramatizin’ life. Me, I get the high-class bodies in this here community because I learned early to dramatize death. I was the first person to use green mats in this town. None of my fam’lies go through the agony of sittin’ and listenin’ to the unpleasant thud of earth on casket. I cover the member with mattin’ that looks like grass — on the flowers go, and the dirt goes in after the loved ones are back in their homes. Death gives most folks the fidgets. Even undertakers gets it. Right now, I get all the best fam’lies over in Baybrook, because the undertaker there spends most of the time embalmin’ himself with corn whisky. Nobody wants to see their mamma or their daddy goin’ into heaven with a busted head where a drunken undertaker dropped ‘em.’

His loud laugh sent a shiver up my spine. He lit a big, fat cigar and blew a cloud of smoke.

‘Next to preachers,’ he went on, ‘undertakers ought to have the most respect in a community. One night not long ago, the chief of police over in Baybrook caught this undertaker I’m tellin’ you about, havin’ a roll in the rumble seat of his car with a plump young widow.

An' when the women in Baybrook got wind of it, what did they say to their husbands? "If I die don't let *that* man have me. I don't want him starin' at *my* naked body."

'When I heard about it, I went right over to Baybrook to see him. "Look here," I said to 'im, "you're a married man an' all. What's this I hear 'bout you rollin' widows in rumble seats all up and down the county roads? Man, I said, you're givin' undertakin' a black eye."

"George," he says to me, "you're new in this business. But it'll get you, too, one of these days, when you've put away as many dried-up old folks as I have, and then you'll understand what it means to have a young, warm, plump-breasted woman love you. I love my wife, but she's gettin' along, and it pure gives me the creeps to crawl in bed beside 'er. I can feel the veins beginnin' to stan' out 'long back of her hands and along her legs and I feel like if I cain't get out of bed and out the room and away from 'er, I'll go crazy. Mrs. Wiggins was workin' for me," he said, "and she understood, an' when I'd hold 'er in my arms I'd feel like I could get right down inside 'er and hide. Mrs. Wiggins was all right — but if it hadn't been her it'd been somebody else. I guess I've been an undertaker too long — I don't know."

Caleb Winters' house was across the way from Colonel Rouse's, a yellow mansion in the sycamores. Mary 'Liza, the Winters' cook, used to try to chase us away with her broom when we'd scribble on the high

brick walls with crayons: 'Walter loves Starkey' — 'Where was Libbeth when the privy burned down?'

A thousand horses and a thousand mules had built the place — and Auburn wagons and strawberry wagons and a nice line of all kinds of harness.

As a boy in school, Caleb had signed his father's name to a three-hundred-dollar check and bought mules with the money. He sold the mules at a profit, repaid his father and started out on his own, a gentleman horse trader.

'I have Buggies,' he advertised in the *Tribune*, 'with either Whitechapel or Piano Bodies, fitted on any of the following springs: King Brewster, Armstrong single leaf, 3 ply Eliptic, shulu or side spring.'

That was in 1893, and by 1913 Caleb was buying horses from Kentucky and Indiana and Missouri. He was making a big-town fortune in Hackney wagons — a fortune that built him the largest and handsomest stables the south side of Richmond. Its ground dimensions were one hundred and fifty by three hundred feet and its solid brick walls rose thirty-four feet throughout. By the close of that year, eighteen hundred head of stock had been sold in the stables and Caleb had done three hundred thousand dollars' worth of business.

He had to have feed for his stock, so he bought forty-odd small farms, and a plantation near Calypso. The schools in town were given a holiday each fall to help pick his cotton, and the grade that picked the most cotton was given a dictionary on a brass stand. In return for the day's labor, Caleb fed the children barbecued pig and trimmings until cold slaw poured out of their ears.



Caleb's sons grew up, and when the eldest was graduated from high school he got a red Stutz Bear-Cat roadster and was sent to Paris, France. He came home with postcard pictures of naked women and stories about having spent a night in a place called 'The House of All Nations.'

Well, old Caleb is dead and his widow looks down from her window in the W.P.A. sewing-room onto the yellow house, where the Standard Oil dealer's children play Tarzan in the branches of the sycamores.

Caleb, Jr., came home once from the city, but not to stay. His nerves were shattered, they said, and he needed some quiet and rest. When I heard what had shattered them, I didn't wonder at his high-tailing it home.

Caleb's older brother, Lambert, stayed on to collect occasional rents from a handful of Negro houses, all that depression and bad management had left of the family fortune. The others, the brothers and the sisters, had moved away to cities, or married away from home. Lambert and his mother, who lived together in a small tenant house, were all that young Caleb had to come home to. He had got into trouble down in Mexico and it cost his mother her diamond rings to get him out of it.

Young Caleb traveled. He carried a briefcase and samples. His territory was New Mexico and Texas, and on his train route between Amarillo and El Paso, he met a personable young woman and three drinks with her led to a week-end in a hotel across the border in Juarez.

The first two days were gay ones, lying in bed, with

room-service food, and room-service liquor — but on the morning of the third day, when young Caleb tried to awaken her to give her her morning drink, he found her not only dead, but cold.

Young Caleb's first impulse was to run. But he realized he'd be stopped at the border, or caught and brought back when the cleaning woman discovered the body and notified the police. So he called the hotel clerk and tried to explain with gestures and a pocket Spanish dictionary what had happened. But when the clerk caught sight of the dead woman in bed, he let out a shriek and dashed out of the room, returning with a half-dozen jabbering police who hurried Caleb off to jail and charged him with a list of crimes he could not read. For four days Caleb sat in jail — the kind where the plumbing is a ditch with water running through the middle of it — eating tortillas and beans, and studying his mind.

On the fourth day, a man came from the American Consulate and told Caleb the police had gone through his late drinking-partner's papers and that she was married to an Army officer who was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. She had recently been discharged from an institution for alcoholics, and at the time she met Caleb was on her way from that institution in Amarillo to rest at her mother's home near El Paso. Her husband had been notified of her death.

Lambert sent a lawyer down from Houston to do what he could for Caleb. After weeks of interpreters and investigations, the boy stepped out of the courthouse, free and broke, into the waiting fists of the Army-

officer husband, who beat him into insensibility before the Mexican police and passers-by could interfere.

At home, when an old friend is glad to see you he takes you back into his kitchen and mixes sugar and water and whisky into a toddy for you and then you sit around the table and talk.

Henry Knowles and I were sitting around his kitchen table with toddies in front of us.

'Sam,' Henry said, 'I nearly die laughin' whenever I think of that woman from Jersey who came down here and tried to show us how to play South. Remember that derved old son of hers, the one who talked through his nose and rolled his R's and bellyached about "Philly" all the time? Every time I think about Arnie McKinly and the Senior Class party at their house, I swear I have to roll on the floor.'

The woman from New Jersey had bought the old Prescott home, one of the columned show places, and in the eyes of the town had generally 'uglied-up' the place with her remodeling of it.

'Yes, sir,' Henry went on, 'she was dead set on making a Southern Colonel out of Junior. Nobody in the Senior Class liked him and not one of us would have gone to his mother's party if our folks hadn't made us. Arnie told me what he was goin' to do. I said, "Arnie, you fool, you, you'll catch hell." "It'd be worth it," he said, "to get even with that ol' Jersey lily." You were in Florida at the time, but, boy, by 'leven o'clock you should have seen that house. Arnie got him a gallon of corn from Hickory Nut Hill, and ev'ry time the punch

bowl was filled he'd pour in as much of it as the bowl would hold. Well, sir, the whole dern graduatin' class got loopin' drunk. Mamma found Junior rollin' his R's flat on his face in the lawn and fainted dead away. You remember how thin and prissy Emma Pate used to look, with her pigtails and glasses. Well, naturally, her mother waited up for her to come home from the party and when Emma staggered into the parlor with her glasses hangin' over one ear and got sick all over Mrs. Pate's plush carpet, that was the end of Mamma and Junior, socially, right then and there.'

It was a sad thing to see Miss Willoughby Jones keeping the W.P.A. playground, picking up balls and rackets after the mill children, and pretending not to hear the rough, harsh language of the older boys.

Miss Willoughby's dainty hands had embroidered the fine pinkish things that make up a young bride's trousseau — the 'something new' things for wedding days. She underclothed all the Winters girls, and their cousins from Clinton, and Mary Steele had come home from New York to have Miss Willoughby make her wedding things instead of buying them in the city. She initialed towels and linens, and advised about the parties, and always made the pound cakes for the receptions. Around Miss Willoughby's cottage on Pollock Street the lilac bushes were thick like hedges. There was a cozy hum to her stove in the back of her shop, downtown, and I have sat around it making eyes at her 'teenish niece and getting nowhere many a Saturday night before ten o'clock and closing time.

Miss Willoughby had a lover. He was a fine old fellow with a grain store and grown children who had married and left him alone in his huge house with an invalid wife, who complained all of her waking hours and just wouldn't die. Some said he paid Miss Willoughby's rent, and many times I have seen him sitting in the back of her shop around the stove, twisting his thumbs in that way of his, and waiting for her to finish with a customer. There was a path through the back lot from his store to hers, and in that drowsy time of a Southern summer afternoon, they'd sit, she sewing, and he talking and twisting his thumbs, one over the other. I doubt if there was much more to their love affair than that, though I hope there was, because one afternoon, sitting there, he uttered a little sound, and slumped over in the chair, and when Miss Willoughby got somebody to him, he was dead. I remember hearing Miss Sue Cameron say what a mistake Mr. Edwin made, dying in Miss Willoughby's shop. A little while after that, she closed the store and tried clerking for somebody else, but now she's on the W.P.A.

Houses in small towns have a way of taking on the personalities of their owners. Anybody riding by Miss Willoughby Jones's house would know she lived there. The vines trailing the side porch and the lilac hedges beside the garden walk looked like Miss Willoughby, somehow. In the same way Miss Elizabeth's house looked like her. Miss Elizabeth was a stately thing — beautiful, aristocratic, with her auburn hair and silver voice sort of riding along together beside her in the wind. When you stopped by the picket fence in front

of her house and looked into the yard, you unconsciously thought of wild violets on a riverbank and listened to hear the sound of laughter and music under jack-o'-lantern-lit maples. Miss Elizabeth and her sisters and their pigtailed cousins stood for the storybook kind of South that you associate with flowing bowls and sweeping skirts and juleps in silver trophies with the blue ribbons on them dripping with the frost.

Miss Elizabeth married a Yankee, a produce broker from up North, who never fitted into my childhood memories of her. That had been before the strawberry center of the State moved thirty miles down the road to Wallace. When she died, he sold her paintings and the silver and the house so he could move on with the strawberry crop. A mule dealer bought the place and built his stables next door. He painted the house deep, dirty mustard color and whitewashed the maples halfway up the trunks. Stones circle the roots of the trees, whitewashed stones, with straggly petunias growing over them. The fanlike windows of her studio are mottled and curtained to keep out the sun.

As I walked along the street I heard the mule dealer shouting inside the stable.

'Whoa, back, you stubborn son-of-a-bitch, you.'

'Mr. Charlieeee, lay off mulin' long enough to come to dinner,' his wife called from the gallery.

'Cooomin',' Mr. Charlie answered. 'Now ain't that jus' like a fool woman, to put on a man's dinner right in the middle of a trade. Whoa, back in there, you long-eared son-of-a-bitch.'

It's a young man's world and where are the sons? My mother is dead and my father is dead and I have gone to the city. My houses, which they worked for and managed to save through two wars and two depressions, are rented for scarcely enough to pay the taxes and the insurance on them. In less time than is believable, I am going to have to save them again from depression. The fathers are dead and where are the men to take their places? Ralph Warren is there to take over his father's farms. The Ricks boys have left off drumming Virginia fertilizers and are running their own plant. Walter Cherry is treasurer of the town, and secretary of the volunteer fire department and a deacon in the church.

Matthew Hatcher, Robert Smith, Mossette Flowers — all young business men. But the Southerlands are gone from the town and their estates are owned by land banks. The Steeles — the Woottens — the Perrys. Their sons have left the town: insurance in Richmond, automobiles in Charlotte, hot dogs in Miami. The daughters: bookstores in New York, business offices in Philadelphia, one-room apartments and part-time jobs in Washington. And the misfits: those who outgrow the town and fail in the city.

Caleb Winters' dark, tomb-like stables still stand. Colonel Rouse's barren fields lie unplowed.

Bob Holmes is there, fighting to leave young Bob half of what old Bob left him. Rodney Knowles, elected to fill his father's place on the County Board by the largest vote ever cast for a candidate, because the people in the country thought they were still voting for the old man. And young Charlie Prescott, who rode and fought and

drank his way through his one-third of his father's estate and is living in a tenant house, with no Great Danes to show, no fine cars to race.

I saw a funeral go by. I stood with my hat off under the maples on the Hill and heard a juke-joint tenor sing 'There's a Gold Mine in the Sky' over the dead body of a boy who could have been a planter and a leading citizen with the hundred-thousand-dollar insurance and lands his father had left him. But when he awakened out of a drunker stupor in a whorehouse on Sugar Hill to discover that he had married the puffy trollop curled up beside him, he bought his fortune's worth of liquor and soaked his sick body in alcohol until his entrails turned to stone and his liver burst and they poured him into his grave.

The Rod and Gun Club is gone and the dam at the Country Club is broken. Finn Lee has moved away to Warsaw to manage a movie house.

Frank Loftin came home to be a doctor and opened offices near Abb Pickett's stables, but after a time he joined the Navy and moved his family to Norfolk. Louis Ring opened offices by Gay's Store, but the Army wanted young doctors and he moved his family to Mississippi.

Mr. Bob Wootten died, but he had lost the home place long before, and young Bob, who had ridden off to the University of North Carolina and Beta Theta Pi in a blue Cadillac, peddled kerosene. But he was no competition for the big oil companies and after a while he moved away to Kinston to live with his wife's folks.

None of the sons are their fathers. No one came



home from the last war to reclaim the fields. The unter-raced, untilled soil runs down yellow furrows into the brooks and into the rivers and into the sea. The Smith farm is a pine field and the home place is a lone chimney standing in ashes.

Coca-Cola is king, and the roads leading through town, not to town, are lined with gas stations. The Standard Oil dealer hasn't time for the hunt and the brick walls of his new house, which he bought in for back taxes, look better to him without the wisteria.

'Gimme a dope.'

'Make mine straight.'

'Here's half a buck, Joe. Run to town an' buy me some 'cue.'

Cotton is stored in the dance hall and the jitterbugs jive at the gas station: five cents a bottle, five cents a record.

'Beat me daddy.'

'Old job.'

'Sharp, boy, like a tack.'

# four

## *River Road*

THE plantations lie along the river road to White Hall.

The Neuse winds through eastern North Carolina like a yellow ribbon through a Negro girl's hair. The counties along its banks have been known as hog and hominy and turpentine counties since before the Civil War. White Hall was the steamboat landing for the Dudley Line, and the steamboats drawing barges and flats loaded cotton and scraped turpentine at the plantation landings from as far up the river as old Waynesboro in Wayne County and towed them down to New Bern, where the big boats picked up the cargoes for Baltimore and New York.

Mr. Maxwell, who had known my Grandpa Byrd, and I sat on the steps in front of the Supply Company at White Hall while he drew me a diagram of The Battle with his cane in the dirt sidewalk.

'Right here, sir, Burnside moved to attack Lee at Fredericksburg. Now — he withdrew most of his North Carolina troops to help in the attack, but he left Foster in command of ten thousand infantrymen and a regiment of cavalry at New Bern, up the river from here.

'This line right here is the Neuse River bridge below Goldsboro, and two days before the battle in Virginia, Foster moved to burn it. But on the way down from New Bern he encountered two thousand of us here at Kinston, under Evans, and we held 'em off for two hours until we had to drop back to Fallin' Creek. Instead of followin' us there, Foster crossed the river at this mark here below Kinston and dropped straight on down towards Goldsboro and his objective.

'Well, now we are eighteen miles from Goldsboro right where we are sittin', and at the river edge yonder, Gen'ral Robertson crossed over to the other side, burned the bridge here after him and dug in along the bank in the trees.

'Foster's battery set up beside the Presbyterian Church you see up there on the hill above town and poured fire into the Thirty-First until they had to withdraw into the woods; but the 'Leventh under Leventhorpe traded with 'em all afternoon until Foster pushed on up the river to Goldsboro. Clingman's brigade wasn't strong enough to keep 'em from burnin' the bridge and cuttin' the rail artery into Wilmington. When Foster got back to New Bern we'd nipped him for five hundred and ninety-one men.

'The big hotel that gave the village its name burned right down to the ground durin' the fight, and the Confederates lost one man. It was poor Rad Stevens, who'd loaded all afternoon, and 'bout four o'clock he told the boys he was tuckered and believed he'd go back and get 'im a smoke for a minute. Well, sir, while poor Rad was sittin' at the foot of a pine tree yonder restin' himself a

spell, a danged ol' Foster cannon ball sailed over the river and hit the top of it and glanced straight down onto the back of Rad's head and broke his neck.'

A mile up the river from the Village is Seven Springs, a health resort, with different mineral contents in each of the seven springs from which it gets its name. Each number is good for an ailment, and combinations cure the fancier diseases. Three of Number One and two of Number Three is the popular prescription — meaning three gallons of the kidney water, because the Number One straight is too strong, and two of the stomach water, poured into a five-gallon bottle, all for fifty cents. If you are a guest at the hotel you can drink all you can hold, free. Rheumatics, dyspeptics and old men with the gout totter up the hill to the hotel. In the eighties, and up until the time of the First World War, it was a fashionable spa where patients or guests broke up, with bowling and croquet and horseshoe-pitching, their trips from the springs to the wooden 'johns' built out over the river. The more particular stayed at the elegant Ninth Spring Hotel, a mile away up in the forest. High on a hill, it looked down from the cliffs over the river, and paths and bridle trails wound in and out through the woods. Gas lights dotted the trails like fireflies in the early evening, and there is scarcely a beech tree left uninitialed and uncarved with hearts.

The dam to the Ninth Spring is broken and the wing of the hotel houses the Negro tobacco hands and their families who work the Maxwell farms beyond the hill. Erosion has erased the buggy roads around the top of the cliffs. Down in the valley the old faithfuls still

gather at the Seven Springs Hotel in July and August. Promoters have tried to buy the springs, but the owner has set his price at a million dollars. A Northern concern once offered the old man one hundred thousand dollars for the place, but I doubt if he could get that now, and there is little chance of its ever coming back to the popularity it enjoyed during its horse-and-buggy days.

There's something peaceful about sitting on the river-bank there and listening to the stillness around you. A young sycamore at the water's edge leans out over the river. The spring floods have left its roots standing out like the veins along the back of an old man's hand. I have sat there hours on end, watching the squirrels scampering through the acorn trees. Cows graze in the pasture near the hotel where the Northern promoters would have had the eighteenth green. The apple trees have rotted for lack of care, but their twisted limbs stretching up the side of the hill seem to bend over and scratch the backs of the hogs rooting around under them, if you look at them with half-closed eyes when the wind is blowing. Shad fishermen kick up the river in their rowboats to check their traps. Under the trees across the river the Confederate breastworks are humps of black river dirt covered with grass and weeds.

The bowling alley is a storage house for the water bottles and the sides of the swimming pool are cracked and broken. The White Hall Women's Club has planted crêpe myrtle hedges along the sides of the road from the Village to the springs. The Presbyterian Church on the hill, where the Yankees stationed their

field pieces to fire at Robertson's men across the river, is nailed up and village boys have broken the window panes with rocks. The hill sloping from the door is a rain-washed yellow gulch and the State Road Department hauls away the clay to repair the back country roads.

But past the Seven Springs Supply Company and on down into Lenoir County the farm land is pure gold. At Moss Hill, looking down over the valley towards Lagrange and the river, the rolling tobacco land, the bottom land, dark and rich, and dotted with shiny tin curing barns, is a sight to see. Every house is painted snowy white, and the fences are new, and the automobiles are new in the barns where the horses and buggies used to be.

The houses along the river road were in the direct line of the Yankee march to Goldsboro, and every house has its historic saber cut or door cracked by rifle butt. Colonel Whitfield's house, in the grove at the bend of the road, was used as the Yankee hospital, and the family still eats off the dining-room table which served as an operating table. There is a tunnel under the house which was used for hiding, and typhoid fever broke out from the amputated arms and legs which careless orderlies tossed into the drinking-water well.

Down the road a piece, Allen Wooten, whose two sons had been killed in the earlier days of the war, made ink for the Confederate Government out of indigo and walnut hulls. Colonel James Davis's home was raided for hogs and horses; and the Daley home, near Byrd's Schoolhouse, was the Confederate hospital. The dark,

blurred stain on the front door is the bloody hand-print of a wounded Southern soldier. The Jackson home, with its hand-hewn lightwood timbers, wooden pegged, and towering chimneys of slave-made bricks, was headquarters for the Federal officers. There is a long crack in the front door from the rifle butt of an irreverent Yankee.

The Davis mill and the Blunt mill, where corn was ground into meal, were both burned, but when Yankee soldiers rode into the Allen Wooten place to burn the mill there, Wooten gave the distress signal of the Masonic Order to the officer in command and his mill was spared.

'Burns' Place,' General Whitfield's old plantation, was the scene of the Home-Coming Celebration after Appomattox. A speaking platform was erected under the trees and there was music and barbecue for those who came back. General Whitfield had operated the first steamboat on the Neuse, and 'Burns' Place,' his home, had taken three years to build. He had personally supervised the selection of the timbers to be hauled from the river bottom to go into the building of the house, and each nail and door hinge was hand-wrought. The four columns that stretched across the front of the house were of solid lightwood and hand-fluted.

I drank a Coca-Cola in the filling station across the road from the driveway. The new county highway has cut the yard in two, leaving the gardens in an elbow off to themselves. Yellow forsythia and cherry blossoms and lilacs tumbled out of a mass of broken-down fence and long-neglected shrubs. The oaks have great, gaping

holes in them where the limbs have rotted away. Negroes live in the big house and the columns which have long since fallen down are rolled under the house out of the way.

Several miles down the road and in the heart of the river-bottom land, is the old Byrd Plantation. In the early eighteenth century, when William Byrd II was developing Westover in Virginia, his first cousin, Thomas II, had come from Massachusetts to settle in Lenoir County. His son Joshua had had three sons, Joshua II, Miller and Nathan. Joshua II had married Jane Herring and in 1833 they had a son named William Sutton Byrd.

In 1858 William Sutton Byrd, who was my grandfather, married Sophia Anne Armanie from up the river in New Bern. She was six years older than her husband, and being a woman of considerable wealth, sent her husband through Trinity College in Durham, North Carolina, which is now Duke University. They had their first child, Lola Hesperia, while William was a student there. The middle name Hesperia had been bestowed upon the baby girl in honor of the Hesperian Literary Society, to which her father belonged and which in turn bestowed upon the child a silver loving cup.

William was graduated with first honors at the Commencement of 1861, which was held in May that year on account of the war. Immediately after graduation he volunteered for service in the Confederate Army, served through four years of the war, and became Captain of Company E in the Sixty-First North Carolina Regiment.



Sophia Anne Armanie was a romantic in her own right. Her father had owned shipping vessels which brought spices and teas to the coastal towns from the West Indies. In the childhood of her mother, Eleanor Eborn, it was the fashionable thing to take sea voyages on the sailing ships to the islands. When Eleanor was nine years old her family took her with them on one of these trips. They traveled on Captain Armanie's boat and young, red-headed Eleanor fell in love with the handsome captain. Childish fancy that it may have been, years later, after the death of her first husband, she married her sailor and Sophia Anne came along in 1839.

Captain Samuel Armanie was of French descent and

and found less than they had anticipated, the soldiers played a game of kicking Eleanor Eborn's bones about the graveyard. When Sophia Anne came to the cemetery and found her mother's bones lying about in bits, a shin bone here, an arm bone there, she flew home as fast as she could and fell down on her knees and prayed that the yellow-fever germs lurking in her mother's remains would strike the Yankees dead. It may have been sheer coincidence, but in three-days' time yellow fever broke out in the Yankee camp and the soldiers died like flies. Fever broke out in the town and I have heard my Aunt Maude, Sophia Anne's youngest child, tell how her mother and her cousins, the Hargetts, nursed the sick and buried the dead without a single member of the family catching the fever.

After the war was over, Captain Byrd brought his wife and young Lola Hesperia back to Lenoir County, where he built a new house on the plantation about six miles east of White Hall. He built a schoolhouse which is to this day known as Byrd's Schoolhouse, and he taught the community children in the wintertime and farmed in the spring and summer. My father, Samuel Armanie, was born there, and Aunt Lillian, and Uncle Eborn. I have listened to Aunt Lola tell about the dark days of Reconstruction, when Grandpa Byrd was head of the Ku Klux Klan in Lenoir County, and how on dark nights men in white robes on huge horses rode up to the door and how Sophia Anne would help him slip his robes out from between the layers of cotton in the mattress and how he'd go riding off at the head of the silent ghosts into the night.

Among my papers I have a contribution to a religious journal called 'Scenes in My Early Ministry' by a Reverend E. A. Wright, written from Birmingham in 1905. It was an account of a protracted meeting that he had held at Byrd's Schoolhouse in 1881 at the invitation of Grandpa William, a college-mate, and at the time of his writing he was still pretty hot under the collar about the Yankees. He described the war as a 'war for Dixie Land.'

"Surely," he wrote, 'no men, from creation down to those memorable days of 1861 to 1865, ever fought for a "fairer land and a nobler cause." We thought ourselves right then; we know ourselves to have been right now, that is, we of that noble band composing the best blood in our beloved Southland, who offered ourselves up on our country's altar in "obedience to her call." [The Reverend Wright was long on quotes.] From every heart there arose a shout, "No longer will we lie submissive at the tyrant's feet; we will conquer or we will die." After four years of "arduous struggle" in which we "exhausted ourselves in whipping the Yankees," we came back home, unwhipped, but as said our immortal Lee, "overcome by superior numbers and resources."'

He called Grandpa one of 'the flowers of our State' and wrote that 'in the spring of 1881 I met with my old college chum and war comrade in Goldsboro. Capt. Byrd gave me a cordial invitation to come to his home and preach for him and his family, and this I promised to do. He had built a neat school house and allowed all orthodox preachers to hold forth there — Methodist,

Baptist (Missionary) and Free Will, Presbyterians and Campbellites.

‘I went in May of that year and preached there regularly once a month until September, when, by his request, I held a series of protracted services. I preached both morning and evening for about four weeks. At every service we had penitents and conversions. I was assisted very much in these services by a good Presbyterian family, who lived about two miles from the school house — the Widow Spence and her four daughters and three sons. Some of these children were nearly or quite grown, while others quite small. My recollection is her oldest boy was twenty years old, and oldest daughter eighteen, while the others ranged down to ten. Capt. Byrd and his children, and Mr. James Byrd and his children and the Spences assisted in the singing, while Capt. Byrd and one of the Spence boys would pray in public when called upon. These all made good altar workers. As usual, we used some old time songs, and sang from Gospel Hymns.

‘I did all the preaching. There came to the meetings two Free Will preachers, who assisted much in altar work, and I permitted each to preach once or twice, and conduct prayer-meeting. The Free Will Baptists have ever been good helpers in revivals.

‘Brother W. S. Byrd’s wife was an invalid at that time and had been confined to her bed for years, and could not walk a step unaided. But notwithstanding her afflictions, she wanted to go to the meetings every day. She could not attend at night, so when the weather was fair, Capt. Byrd would have her lifted out to a

"Jersey wagon," drawn by a gentle horse, at the front gate, on a mattress and have her conveyed to the school house, only about half a mile from his residence. She would then be taken out of the vehicle and carried into the school house and be given a comfortable place right in front of the pulpit. She was a "spirit-filled" Christian, a fine singer and her very appearance was an inspiration to the services. At times her "cup" would run over and she would shout aloud the praises of our God. She has, no doubt, "crossed over the river" and is now waiting to welcome her loved ones left behind and this humble scribe to the "sinless home of the soul."

'We had, all told, in these meetings, thirty-five conversions. Prior to these meetings this school house had been a free for all preaching place, and all kinds of preachers had been allowed to preach there, that is, those of the orthodox churches. The time had been taken up mostly by the Free Will Baptists and the Presbyterians, and Rev. B. F. Marable, Presbyterian pastor of the church at Goldsboro, a very gifted man and a high-toned Christian gentleman, had tried hard to Presbyterianize that neighborhood, but failed. It remained for this humble scribe, under the Divine guidance of the Holy Ghost, to make it Methodist. To Him (God) be all the glory.

'On my return home Capt. Byrd brought me back in his buggy, and on this trip we stopped for the night at the residence of Brother Jack Carey, a mutual friend, two miles out from Goldsboro, on the banks of the Neuse. Brother Carey asked Byrd "where had Brother Wright been?" He, Byrd, replied: "Wright has been

down in our parts carrying on a revival, and I will tell you [Carey], he has been 'hewing to the line; let the chips fall where they will.' We have had [said Byrd] the best revival ever held in our woods.'" "

One morning we were sitting on the porch talking when a car drove up into the yard. A nice-looking young woman got out of it and came up the walk. There was a familiar something about her face, yet I couldn't recall ever having seen her before.

'Good morning,' she said. 'Is this where Sam Byrd lives, and aren't you he?'

'Why, yes; I am.'

'Well, you don't know me, but I'm one of your cousins from down in Lenoir County and we read in the papers about your being home and we want to give you a barbecue. We all knew your daddy.'

I was a year and a half old when my father died. I didn't remember him, but after his death my mother had had an enlargement made from a small photograph of him, and as long as I can remember it hung over the fireplace in the living-room. This new cousin from down around Byrd's Schoolhouse had the same high forehead, the same Byrd nose, and her eyes were brown like Aunt Maude's.

Sam Byrd's boy was home from the city and his country cousins wanted to give him a barbecue. I knew what that meant: the cooking, the baking, the men up before dawn getting the pigs ready at the pit — and I went.

There was a Sam Byrd Day at Ebbett's Field in

Brooklyn once, when I was in 'Tobacco Road,' and another Sam Byrd, the ball-player, was playing with the Cincinnati Reds. I in a Red uniform, and he backstage at the Forrest Theatre on Broadway. I wore uniform Number 25 and when Babe Herman knocked the home run that won the game I was fined and thrown off the field for doing a war dance outside the dugout; that is, until the umpire discovered that the Red uniform clothed the guest of honor. In the ninth inning Sam saved the game with a magnificent running catch back of short stop, and I have the ball: 'Sam Byrd to Sam Byrd.'

That was Ebbett's Field — that was big time — and as Roark Bradford would have put it, 'That day I was a dog.' But this was different, this day. Sam Byrd's boy was home from the city and his cousins from down in Lenoir County were giving him a barbecue.

Hattie, Aunt Lola's daughter, and Sophia, Aunt Maude's oldest, went with me. We were there by eleven, and our cousins were lined up to welcome us. The house, back under the trees there, near the river, and surrounded by rolling acres of tobacco land, was spotlessly clean. The yards were swept bare. Down across the nearest field the men were at the barbecue pit, and little whiffs of smoke, black with grease, floated towards the house bringing an aroma of cooking pig. I had never seen any of the people before, and it was my loss. There were nearly a hundred of them in all — cousins, teachers from Moss Hill School, the County Farm agent, and friends. The children were tanned, and pigtailed, and played games under the

chinaberry trees. The women were busy in the kitchen, and the older girls talked movie stars and radio programs and there was nothing 'country' about any of them. New Fords dotted the grove and the men had on their Sunday suits.

The tables were tobacco trucks rolled under the trees and covered with oilcloth and white tablecloths. There was barbecued pig by the washtubful. Slaw in kitchen pans and corn bread many hands high. Every conceivable kind of Southern homemade pickle, and a tub of iced tea. There was liver and haslet, and hog-killing, and platters of fried chicken, and cakes and pies, and a freezer of homemade ice cream.

I said the blessing. I stood at the end of one of the tables and watched them, all of them with their heads bowed, and tears came to my eyes. Away off somewhere a whistle blew for twelve o'clock.

Cousin Evelyn's boys had ridden out from their work in Lagrange for dinner. They stood there beside her — and young Jeanette, and Bertha Mae — and Elsie and Mary Elizabeth, and Dora May, who was sixteen and would be married as soon as school was out. Mrs. Hussey had her head bowed and her eyes closed, but her arm was making wide sweeps over the end of the table with a paper fan to keep the flies away from the food. Out over the fields the wind sent little eddies of dust scurrying along and the robins were busy digging worms from the newly turned soil.

Tears came to my eyes, because these people were my friends, even though I had never seen them before. Sam Byrd had gone to school here, and his father had



taught the old folks when they were young, and they had followed him to town for legal advice after he had become a lawyer or when they had wanted a piece of land surveyed. And when he was stricken during a murder trial at the courthouse in Warsaw and died, leaving a young widow and a year-old baby, they had come in from the country to sit with her and console her. And now all this gathering was for Sam Byrd's boy, who was home from the city.

I racked my brain for some appropriate blessing for the occasion: they would expect it of me. Then, suddenly, I remembered a single line that I had seen in a magazine some years before and it seemed so right that I should use it, for it expressed everything that I felt in my heart: 'Bless us this day as we friendship together.'

When everybody had eaten as much as they could hold the women cleared away the tables and we sat under the trees and talked. Small talk, about crops and prices, and the coming Commencement at the school-house. Later we went over to a piece of 'new ground' to see the new tractor work. At the edge of the fields the tin tops of the curing barns mirrored the afternoon sun in blinding flashes of light. Cousin Evelyn's boys went back to their jobs in town and the smaller children went down to the creek to swim. Lazy, sleepy afternoon — drowsy with food and friendship and the music of soft, drawling voices. These were fine folks, my new cousins, and it was good to be home.

The creek is half a mile back of the house in the pasture. When the men had shaken hands around and had gone back to their overalls for the afternoon's work in

the fields, I walked down to the creek with some of the older girls. When we got as far as the pasture fence I heard a shrill young voice shout 'Soooots!' and there was a scampering of dripping naked bodies. One brown water baby stood poised like a startled fawn on a rock, all hands and feet as she tried to untangle her swimming suit. There was a terrific splash and as we stood at the edge of the creek a dozen wild Indians dove in and out of the water like otters and shrieked with laughter.

I carried Uncle Elmer to the house on my back. His young legs were too short to keep up with the grown-ups and the weight of his full stomach slowed him up considerably.

When we got back to the yard, a girl named Eula Lee left the group of rocking women under the chinaberries and started over to me just as Cousin Evelyn came out of the kitchen.

There was a funny little smile on Eula Lee's face.

'Sam, Lonnie Smith wants to know if you'll come out to the road a minute.'

'Well, ask the boy in,' said Cousin Evelyn.

'I did, but he said he guessed he'd just better sit in the car, if you wouldn't mind coming out.'

'Lonnie Smith, Lonnie Smith; do I know him?'

Eula Lee giggled.

Cousin Evelyn shut her up with a look.

'Why, sure you do, if you've a mind to read the papers. He's the boy who married little Jenny Bowden. She was a mighty young thing when he married her. We didn't think much about it, if that's what he wanted and her folks didn't object, but some men from New

York came down here and took pictures of them and wrote about them and come near to breakin' them up.'

I remembered. Child Bride. Pictures of them standing side by side in front of their cabin. Pictures of her dolls, and their bedroom, and the stove where she cooked his meals.

'Romantic and pathetic,' I remembered having said to myself when I read of it.

I looked at Cousin Evelyn, who had been married, herself, when she was fourteen. Her boys were grown and had good jobs in town; her girls were in school and led the 4-H Club and took prizes in cooking at the County Fair. Her husband was straight and strong and his fields were the first to be plowed in the spring and his crops were the first to reach the markets. There were no great white columns in front of their house, but they owned it and it was theirs and last year the barns had been repainted. You felt the devotion of these people for each other when you sat down at their table with them. These are the people, and theirs is the land and this right of theirs to love each other and to own these things that are theirs is what Americans fight for. Theirs is the Democracy.

Well, young Lonnie Smith had taken himself a child bride and I looked down at the pudgy, acne-faced girl giggling behind her hand and thought, 'You stupid, squirmy little fool, if you are what young Lon had to choose from, I don't blame him.' Anyway, it wasn't exactly new to this country, this child bride thing. William Bartram, writing in 1774 of his travels through this very Southland, found that it was not uncommon

among the Muscogulge Indians 'for a great man amongst them, who has already a dozen wives, if he sees a child of eight or nine years of age, who pleases him, and he can agree with her parents or guardians, to marry her and take her into his house at that age.'

Maybe Lon was a great man, and undoubtedly the child pleased him.

I wanted to meet this boy who had the courage to take home his young bride in the face of a giggling community.

'Come on,' said Cousin Evelyn, 'I'll walk you out to the car.'

As we came around the house a tall, gangling fellow got out of the automobile at the side of the road. He took off his cap and stepped forward to meet us.

'Hello, Mis' Evelyn.' It was Lonnie.

'Howdy, Lonnie; this is Mr. Sam.'

'Hello, Lonnie,' I said. 'Why don't you come on in and have some of Cousin Evelyn's barbecue? It was fine and there's enough left to feed a Sunday-School picnic.'

'Thank you, Mr. Sam, but I ate at home before I left. Mis' Evelyn, if you don't mind, I'd like to steal Mr. Sam away from you long enough to talk to him about something.'

'Why, it's all right with me, Lon.'

'Thank you, ma'm; I'll bring him right back.'

'Tell Hattie and Sophia I'll be back in a little while,' I said, and climbed into the seat by Lonnie.

'How's Jenny, Lon?' asked Cousin Evelyn.

'She's fine and growin' some.'

'Well now you bring that young'n on over here to see us, you hear? You both come on over this Sunday to dinner.'

Lonnie sort of smiled at her gratefully and we drove off down the road. The boy was noticeably embarrassed, and as we rode on I could see that he was trying hard to get up enough courage to speak. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was a likable lad, this famous young bridegroom. High, tanned cheekbones, and hair bleached from the sun. Steel-blue eyes that looked straight into yours, and his hands on the wheel were strong and looked like hands that were used to work.

'Mr. Sam, we want to be let alone,' he finally blurted out.

'Why don't you tell me about it, Lon?'

'You are from New York and we read about you and your shows in the *Argus* and you know those folks that write in the papers and I want you to tell 'em to leave us alone. Every time some little old gal in Virginia or Mississippi has a baby they run a big story in the papers about it and most of the time they dig out a picture of me and Jenny and put it in the papers beside it. Then people ride by in their cars and point at us and giggle and that makes Jenny cry. Twice now she's run home to her ma and I've had to go beg her to come back to me. One of these times she'll run away for good, and by God, I love her so good that if these folks with their kodaks and their fun-making don't let us alone I'm goin' to take my gun and blow their guts out.'

Looking at Lonnie's face, I knew he'd do it, too.

'Is this what you wanted to tell me, Lonnie?'

'Yes. You are from New York. Tell 'em to leave us alone.'

'You love her right much, don't you, Lonnie?'

'I love her so good that if she'd run away and leave me I'd go crazy. I'd fall on the ground and dig a hole in the earth with my teeth and lay down in it and die, I love her so much. Look, Mr. Sam, when I heard you were going to be at Mis' Evelyn's for the barbecue today I thought maybe if I could get you to come over and see her and see how pretty she is and how much she means to me that you'd know how it was, and when you go back to New York you could just go right up to 'em and tell 'em to leave us alone.'

This, then, was love. Lonnie's folks had died and he had got his piece of 'new-ground' and his two brothers had got their shares. Lonnie had cleared his land and built him a cabin — a neat, sturdy affair with a sitting-room and bedroom combination and a dining-room and kitchen and a porch out back. He had gone to Abner Bowden's house one day to ask old Abner's advice about his seed beds. Jenny had been standing by the well. Lonnie couldn't remember ever having seen her before and when he looked at her too long she hadn't turned away or hung her head, but stared straight back at him.

She listened to the two men talk awhile and then went around the house out of sight. Presently, she came back and in her hand she clutched a scraggly little bunch of flowers she had picked at the edge of the field.

'Here, take 'em,' she said to Lonnie, and walked on

into the house and shut the door. Old man Abner laughed, but Lonnie didn't, and that night when he went to bed he couldn't sleep for thinking about her. Nor could he work next day.

Along about supper time he walked on down to Abner's house. He found him out in the lot, feeding up.

'Mr. Abner,' he said, 'I've got seven acres of land and a new house. I want to marry Jenny.'

'She's too young,' Abner had said.

'I've heard Pa say if a girl was big enough she was old enough, and I guess Jen's big enough. If she ain't, I don't care — I want her.'

Old Abner turned his feed bucket upside down and sat down on it. He studied his mind awhile.

'Well,' he said, 'if her ma don't need her it's all right with me. Come on in the house. You might as well stay for supper.'

Next day Abner and his wife went with them to give their consent to the marriage and that night Jenny went home with Lonnie as his wife.

It was after school started and Jen hadn't gone back that people in town started talking and the newspapermen came with their cameras.

Lonnie's house was new. The boards weren't painted, nor was the tin roof, and there was that unpainted brightness about everything. Jenny must have known I was coming home with Lonnie, for she was sitting on the front porch when we drove through the yard gate. I caught the yellow flash of her dress as she darted into the house. But when we stopped and got out of the car she came out of the house to meet us.

‘Howdy.’

‘Hon, this is Mister Sam.’

Lon sat on the porch steps, whirling his cap in his hands in that way of his. I took the rocker, and Jen sort of perched like a bird on the edge of a straight chair. She must have known I couldn’t help from looking at her, for she held her face up to me in a way that I could have taken it in my two hands, while Lon looked on with the anxiety of a father seeing his child through her first piano recital.

Her face was round and full and her pert little nose was sprinkled with a rainbow of freckles. When she smiled her hazel eyes crinkled around the edges and you could see that her back teeth had not all come through. Her sunburned hair fell in curls back of her ears and her ears had been scrubbed until they shone like wet sea shells. Everything about her was neat as a pin, and after a bit when she felt more at ease and prattled away about her house and laughed at the panfuls of rice she had had when she first tried to cook it for Lon, I noticed that she had that little nervous habit of digging her fingers into the side of her thumbnails characteristic of children.

Her kitchen floor was scoured spotless and a cloth was thrown over the food on the table to keep the flies away. When she ran into the dining-room to bring me a piece of the lemon cake that she had baked that morning I could see that the curves of her body were those of a young girl.

Milk had been lowered in a jar to cool in the well and as she hurried about, cutting the cake for us and pouring



our glasses full of foaming milk, Lon's eyes never left her.

Lon had lined a flower garden for her with pieces of broken bricks. Petunias, nasturtiums and the aster beds were marked with the empty seed packages pierced with sticks and stuck in the earth. They looked like the handmade bark boats that children sail in puddles after a rain. He had whitewashed the trunks of the china-berry trees and planted a wisteria vine at the side of the 'garden house.'

Lon had made the barn with his own hands. The loft was full of hay and a young mule snorted around in the lot. Dominico chickens scratched about in the yard, and a sow and a litter of pigs squealed and wallowed in the pen. Lon was a good provider. Jen said so, and when I looked up and saw the sun setting and remembered Sophia and Hattie waiting for me back there at Cousin Evelyn's house I hated that the day was over. In exchange for the jars of pickles and corn and tomatoes that Jen heaped on me to take back to town I promised all the old movie magazines I could lay my hands on.

We didn't talk much on the way back to Cousin Evelyn's, but I could tell by the look on his face that he knew how I felt about things, and if you don't quite know, I'll tell you, as I promised him I would: 'You leave Lon and his wife alone.'

# five

## *Hickory Nut Hill*

**H**ICKORY NUT HILL is a composite picture of all the Catfish Alleys, Sugar Hills and George F. Rows between Richmond and Vicksburg. It lies just beyond the town line, and here, gentlemen of color, strolling arm in arm with their café-au-lait belles on Sunday afternoons, are free from the long arm of the local police.

To get to Hickory Nut Hill you leave Center Street and turn into the Smith's Chapel Road, which leads on past the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Across from the church, on the corner, the old Oliver place sits away back from the street in its grove of live-oak trees. Miss Laura Lingle's house is farther down the street. I never pass Miss Laura's house without thinking of the tragedy that befell her one wintry afternoon. When the news got about, it became not only Miss Laura's personal tragedy, but the town's tragedy, also.

Her house sits back under a row of chinaberry trees, and is about halfway between town and Hickory Nut Hill. In her sixties, alone, aristocratic, practically penniless, she personally has never surrendered to Grant, Sherman or any of the 'damn Yankees.' She has a

constitution of iron, and has never heard of the adage, 'If you begin to doubt, the gastric juices will find out,' and her prize possession was a pair of store-bought teeth.

Cozy about her winter fire, she was eating oranges one afternoon when her doorbell rang. To better enjoy the oranges, she had removed her fine store-bought teeth and had placed them in her apron. At the sound of the doorbell, she arose quickly and tossed the orange peelings, seeds and pulps, together with her fine teeth, into the fire.

Miss Laura got halfway to the front door before she realized what she had done. Her piercing screams brought Mrs. Fannie Kincaid into the room, where she found Miss Laura digging madly into the ashes with the fire poker.

But it was too late, for there, grinning at them and rapidly melting away in the flames, were the teeth.

I never think of Miss Laura's anguish without remembering that magnificent bit in one of Lula Vollmer's plays where a dried-up little old man was describing the death of his wife. The two of them were sitting about their fireplace when suddenly, 'she just riz and spit and drapped.'

'Miss Laura's lost her teeth.'

The news spread like wildfire. The neighbors came and brought soup. Mrs. Fannie blamed herself, personally, for the tragedy. If she had stayed home where she belonged, it never would have happened.

Small towns have a way of meeting their personal tragedies. I have heard of women at club meetings and afternoon bridge parties ripping one another up their respective backs with jagged bits of juicy gossip. But

let the object of their gossip get into some 'legitimate' trouble, let some sickness occur, let some death happen in her family, and these same gossipers will be the first to bake cakes to bring to the house, and to sit up nights.

I, myself, remember when the news got about town that Anna Ingram was going to have a baby. Anna, a rather plain, simple soul, had come to town to live with an aunt when she had been about ten or eleven years old. At the time of her indiscretion, Anna was seventeen, and unmarried. I expect it was several months before she was fully aware of what was happening to her. No one ever knew who the father of Anna's child was. While the town speculated, Anna, never accusing, never complaining, sat endless afternoons on her front porch and rocked. After a time, the novelty of trying to guess the father of Anna's baby wore off, and when time came for her confinement, the neighborhood women set about making baby clothes which would have put Lane Bryant's to shame, and to brewing chicken broth, the like of which I am sure Anna had never tasted before.

Small towns are like that, and Miss Laura — well, Miss Laura was 'in trouble,' and over on Pollock Street the Pickett girls, Lelia and Mary, were doing something about it. Their sister, Margaret, had married a dentist who lived in Georgia. Quicker than you could say 'Atlanta Southern Dental College,' Doctor Herring, the local dentist, had donated an impression of Miss Laura's gums and away it went to the Pickett girls' brother-in-law.

It was no time at all before the finest pair of teeth,

with perfected suction-grip plate, came special delivery from Georgia, and Miss Laura was cozy again about her winter fire, eating oranges and telling people how it all happened.

Romantic little Southern towns have a way of giving matter-of-fact names to churches and crossroads and brooks. In outlying communities, churches will become Bear Marsh, or Wolfscrape, or the one I like to say most, Beautancus. Country correspondents will write their items to the *Tribune*, which comes out twice a week. Items that go 'Mr. and Mrs. Jones are all smiles, it's a boy,' and sign names like 'Blue Eyes.'

Often I have read ads in the *Tribune*: 'Wanted — correspondents to sign their names to news items; not for publication, but for office identification.'

In this way, the winding brook that is halfway mark between town and Hickory Nut Hill has always been called simply, the Big Ditch. As a boy I have hunted crayfish along its banks; and picked wild violets; and played at safari. Away across town it runs by my Aunt Lola's house. On rainy nights, after I grew tired of hearing her tell how Grandpa William Byrd led white-robed Ku Klux horsemen in night-time raids down in Lenoir County, I would lie still and listen to the waters of the Big Ditch rushing by and dream of shooting rapids in far-off strange lands. In my dreams I always returned victorious from the diamond mines of Africa, and from the jungles of South America, rich in strange furs and ivories. A tall, muscular servant, jet black, and resplendent in beads and carrying a wicked-looking

spear, was my shadow. The mayor never failed to meet the train, and I was taken immediately thereafter to dine at Mrs. Bessie Wootten's house, where her golden-haired daughter Elizabeth's hand occasionally touched mine under the table.

Mostly, the Big Ditch is no more. Several years ago the health officers and scientists from State University condemned the brook as a mosquito-breeder. Terrible things spring from mosquitoes, so town budgets were rebalanced to include the cost of the huge sewerage pipes which were dropped into the brook. Dirt was thrown on top and the ridges planted in grass.

This was by Aunt Lola's house; but not as far over as Mrs. Dollie Bell's house. The budget didn't get over that far.

Her magnificent white house sits along the banks of the Big Ditch. Four big white columns stretch across the front. When I was a little boy, all the land back of the house was Mr. Bell's farm. Acres and acres of red, rolling tobacco land. In the late summer when the fires in the curing barns were burning and Negroes and buyers from the markets in Wilson and Kinston and Goldsboro were everywhere, we were always asked out to the Bells' for barbecue suppers and melon splittings.

Mr. Bell was a red-faced man who drank a lot and rode fast horses that had come all the way from Richmond. He always shouted at the top of his voice. In the curing season, if we happened to be at Mrs. Dollie's for supper, my mother used to say to me: 'Don't go out near the barns. Mr. Bell is excited again and you might hear him.'

What suppers they were! Long tables, usually laid out in the yard under the oak trees, with trays and trays of hot, smoking barbecued pig and barbecued chickens. Negro women in spotless white aprons, carrying great pans of crisp cold slaw. Steaming platters of corn bread. And pickles — every conceivable kind of pickle. Pickled peaches, and watermelon rind, and artichoke-root pickles and sweet-cucumber pickles, and sour-cucumber pickles. Mrs. Mary Pickett always brought cakes from her house. Angel-food cakes and devil-food cakes. Mrs. Emma Summerlin brought spiced cakes and fruit cakes. There were Lady Baltimores, and chocolates covered with dripping white icings, and upside-downs with pineapple and peach and cherry. There was sweet wine made from the James grapes and scuppernongs, strawberry acid, and iced tea and buttermilk. The buttermilk was kept in huge jugs and lowered by rope into the farmyard well, where it cooled. For the men there was corn whisky and Bourbon and beer.

When the supper was over, and little bits of barbecue had been packed up for some of us to take home, the rest was taken down to the curing barns for the Negroes to eat. Always, when we left, Mrs. Dollie made my mother take some of the barbecue home with us. As if we hadn't eaten so much of it that the sight of barbecue for the next week wouldn't make us ill. I suppose she did that because my father was dead and because my mother was such a gay young thing that she felt sorry for us. Mrs. Dollie was always sweet like that.

Well, all that was when I was a little boy.

Now, a big neon sign, 'Dew Drop Inn,' is nailed across

Mrs. Dollie's big white columns. The upstairs part of the house has been made over into two-room apartments, and parked highway trucks, in charge of the men who have rented these apartments, have crushed the rows and rows of spring-flower beds that used to line the drive leading up to the house. The grape arbors are gone, and in the back, the white lattice fences over which the Paul's Scarlet climbers ran riot have long since fallen down and rotted away.

But that is all right, because Mrs. Dollie and Mr. John have been dead these many years now and sleep side by side under a big stone angel in Maple Hill Cemetery up the road. I'm glad that Mr. John can't see the neon sign on his fine Doric columns that came all the way from Richmond, though. He wouldn't like that.

James Dixon, goddamit, always just wanted to be left alone. From Dew Drop Inn you can still see him sitting on his wide front porch, rocking and spitting, and shouting at everybody who drives past. Day in, day out, for as long as I can remember, he has sat there, looking out over the cool white gravestones of Maple Hill Cemetery, waving his hands at Aunt Amanda on Saturday afternoons when she made her weekly trips to the cemetery to carry the flowers for Uncle Cherry's and Frances', and Mother's and Gordon's graves; and to Negroes going home to the Hill after the day's work; or to some white friend, trying to slip home unnoticed after too many rounds of Hickory Nut Hill corn whisky. Mr. James occasionally left his rocking-chair



long enough to make a quick trip up the road to the Hill himself. They say that after his little boy was killed by an automobile one day when he was riding his bicycle along the highway, he started drinking by himself. But if he did, I guess that was his own business.

Peter Breazeale was mayor of the town when Maple Hill Cemetery was laid off on the town's map. It got its name from the wide rows of maple trees that he planted along the walks and drives. In due time, they grew into fine shade trees. That is, all of them but one.

Mr. James cut down the tree over his family plot with an axe. He said his mammy always liked sunshine, goddamit, and it was cold enough down there where she was already, without having any damn maple tree to shade her.

Everybody said Mr. James sure was a queer one; but nobody has ever set out another tree to replace the one he cut down.

Hickory Nut Hill corn whisky is as pure as water; that is, it is as white. The price is five, ten or fifteen cents a throw. You pour your own throw.

After a Saturday night of frequent throws, one Homer Little, well digger, pump fixer, general town putterer, came home to find his front door locked. He promptly smashed the colored-glass front, reached inside and let himself in with a turn of the key. He then went upstairs, undressed and went to bed and bled to death without ever knowing he had cut his wrist on the jagged edges of the broken glass.

Algie Mazingo, sometime barber at the Crystal

Barber Shop, got halfway back to town one night after he had been drinking, and fell asleep beside the road. Abb Pickett, riding out to his farm about nine o'clock next morning, found him lying there.

He awakened the cold, numb, embarrassed Algie enough to get him home.

'Good God, Mr. Abb,' he said, 'do you suppose anybody saw me?'

'Saw you?' said Abb. 'Didn't you know about Miss Fran Andrews' brother's funeral this morning?'

'No,' chattered Algie.

'He died in Asheville Tuesday and they brought him home on the early morning train to bury him. The whole funeral rode right by here about an hour ago. I guess everybody in town saw you.'

They say Algie had been drinking Hickory Nut corn the night he broke into Henry Harrington's garage apartment and tried to rape the Harrington's colored cook. It was hushed up — not before everybody in town heard about it, however; so the *Tribune* never printed the evidence that would have said whether or not Algie had been drinking.

Algie's troubles didn't interest me much, one way or the other; except possibly to give me a laugh or two. I didn't figure he was much good anyway, and if he wanted to try and change his luck by raping the Harrington's cook, that was his own affair. Around the Crystal Barber Shop the opinion was that Algie's sin was in always being found out. Algie was a fool.

But Garth Wheeler's troubles did interest me. But for the Grace of God, there might have been I.

Scion of the finest blood that was spilled at Chickamauga; definite Son of Cincinnatus; horseman; hunter; gentleman; Garth drank his way through the freshman classes of the Universities of Virginia and North Carolina, Mercer College, Emory, and the last time I saw him he could still throw a jug over the crook of his arm and drink for five minutes without spilling a drop. Fiery, tow-headed, with small steel cables for muscles, he could never leave a bottle on the table.

Octave Flannigan made whisky for Garth's family and for mine, during the days of Prohibition. That amendment to the Constitution was fine for the man in the street, but of course did not apply directly to us, or to the mayor, the town council, the Southerlands, the Cherrys and the Woottens. Who ever heard of a barbecue without tall frosted goblets, choked with mint sprays and brimming Bourbon? What was a hunt breakfast but an excuse to stir up dozens of fresh country eggs, thick cream and good whisky into bowls of rich eggnog?

So Octave, immune and untouchable, was set up on World Wonder Branch, which ran through a strip of land owned by the mayor and where the water was purest. Schooled in the finest distillery in Baltimore, Octave ran his mash through a copper still, not one time, but five times. Then the raw corn whisky, a good 110 proof, was run through dried peaches for flavor, after which it was stored away in charred kegs to age. That is, age as long as we would let it.

One bright spring morning, a general horrified shriek echoed from one end of the town to the other. For up

in Maple Hill Cemetery marble angels' wings lay broken under the rows of trees. Stone hearts had been split asunder. Headstones had been kicked roughly off their foundations. Epitaphs and bits of finely chiseled baby fingers — in fact, forty-odd gravestones had been destroyed wholly or in part by vandals unknown, in the cemetery, supposedly sometime the night before.

The town, *en masse*, headed by Chief of Police Stevens and his bloodhounds, and my own indignant Aunt Amanda, descended on Maple Hill. The brilliant editorial by Homer Brock in last week's *Tribune* denouncing lynching was either forgotten or completely ignored.

I trembled for the vandals. When I was at the University of Florida I rode one night with an excited group of students to a neighboring town to view the remains of a Negro who had been lynched that day for assaulting an elderly white woman. He had been strung to a tree in the Courthouse Square. Guns that had not been shot since the Civil War were brought out of closets and taken down from over mantelpieces. Hunting rifles, deer guns, twenty-twos, all were brought out onto the square and women, children and men shot at the poor bastard all afternoon. I talked with a member of the 'clean-up' committee afterwards. The weight of the lead in the Negro's body had stretched him so that the 'committee' had been forced to cut him in two in order to get him into the pine-box coffin. But that isn't what had annoyed the 'committee man.' After burying him, they discovered that they had buried the Negro with his head towards the east, instead of towards the west,

the confusion due to having had to cut him in two to make him fit, of course.

'You know,' the committee man said, 'we had to dig that son-of-a-bitch up and turn him around again, on account of we could have got into trouble for not burying him with his head towards the west. Nigger or not, every man's got the right to be buried with his head towards the setting sun. Yes, sir.'

I never remember seeing that angry rush of people to Maple Hill Cemetery that morning without recalling the magnificent scene from the motion picture of 'The Tale of Two Cities,' where Blanche Yurka as Madame Defarge leads the revolutionary rabble through the streets of Paris. The search for the 'vandals,' as the screaming headlines of the *Tribune* called them, took on the proportions of a major crime hunt. County and state police were called in to assist. Editorials flashed across the pages of all the near-by newspapers, and then, just as the search was reaching its peak, surely in interest, anyway, the whole thing abruptly ceased.

I never knew why until years later. A few of our parents may have known at the time, but if they did they never spoke of it. For Chief Stevens' bloodhounds had found their vandal, and had stopped at the Wheelers' front door.

It was Mr. Abb Pickett who told me about it, one afternoon when we were beating our hands to keep warm on a deer stand near the Onslow Rod and Gun Club. Garth had been drunk in Hickory Nut Hill on the night of the 'desecration,' as it has come to be known. On his way home, which leads through the

cemetery, Garth had taken offense at a huge stone angel, whose white finger kept pointing at him, no matter which way he turned. A well-aimed brick had promptly removed the accusing finger with such satisfying success that he had gone through the entire cemetery wildly and gleefully breaking and beating and kicking as he went until he came out on the far side, where he went on down the road home and to bed and to sleep, forgetting the whole experience.

Out of deference to his father, who was the most beloved citizen in the community, the hounds were called off. There was a sort of a mutual agreement among those few who knew never to mention their secret again.

Chief Stevens, however, with an eye towards public opinion, and certainly in the direction of his job, decided that it would be best for the dogs to sniff out somebody, even if he would have difficulty proving guilt. So he arrested two Negro boys who admitted that they had been through the cemetery that night, but 'fore God, they didn't know nothin' 'bout no tombstones.'

After an investigation of their whereabouts on the night of Garth's slug-fest, and finding no evidence that would involve them in the 'wing-busting,' the two boys were given thirty days at labor on the city streets. The charge was disorderly conduct. That was all right, though, because by this time the town had got over most of its anger, and as far as the boys were concerned, they hadn't worked since cotton-picking time, and thirty days chopping grass off the streets meant three square meals a day for a month.

You are out of town when you pass the Manufacturing Plant, but before you reach the strawberry fields, the woods and the straightaway to Calypso, there are rows of brown-toned Negro houses where Hickory Nut Hill dwindles into nothingness down the line. Green Parrot tearooms; funeral homes with sickly neon; churches with half-finished spires; and clusters of rickety shacks with garish window curtains.

In one of those houses back from the railroad tracks lives a mulatto girl, beautiful in the mystic manner, with café-au-lait-colored skin and hair like a raven's wing. There was a time when people used to stare at her on Saturday afternoons when she walked to town and when they passed her house and saw her sitting on her front porch, rocking, but now they leave her alone. The kids who used to snicker behind their hands when she passed by are grown and have either gone away or have forgotten. I remember hearing my mother and Mrs. Mary and Miss Lelia whisper about her one night when they thought I had finished my lessons and had fallen asleep. She had had a lover and her lover was white and he had had a sin greater than that of loving her: his sin was in being obvious.

He was a young cashier in the bank, beau of the barbecues, most likely to succeed, and engaged to the most eligible girl of the town. Nobody knew just when his affair with his dark mistress had begun, and had he handled it in a quiet, inconspicuous way, the town fathers would probably have nudged each other and winked at the fact that Bob was having a little 'change of luck' before settling down. But Bob grew careless and

people saw him slipping out of her house in the early hours. Soon it was common knowledge where he went nights after he left his fiancée. Times, he would stay the night and in the morning go directly from her house to the bank. Bob insulted a sense of small-town decency; Bob was obvious — and one morning when he slipped out of her house to go to work, he was 'waited on' by a committee of townsmen, who suggested that he be out of town by the afternoon train.

He took a seat in the rear coach and as the train neared the Negro quarters he arose and went out on the platform. The doors of her house were closed and the shades were drawn, but he knew that from behind one of the curtained windows she was telling him good-bye with her eyes. As the train sped by, he lifted his hat and bowed gracefully, and it was so that the last pair of eyes saw him, for he never came home again.

The Avenging Angel Free Will African Baptist Church, Reverend J. Namesake Troublefield, Elder and Prop., greets all worshipers to Hickory Nut Hill thrice weekly: Wednesday night at prayer meeting, and at regular services on Sundays. Formerly a mash-mixer for Octave Flannigan at his World Wonder Branch whisky still, Elder J. Namesake got the call to preach the gospel, gathered his co-workers and deacons about him, and with nickels and dimes, and gifts of bricks and panes of glass from white friends, has built a fine memorial to faith.

Square, white and sturdy, it is all completed except for a gaping hole near the steeple. You walk up the steps, into the vestibule and look up into a wide ex-



panse of stars and sky. Our own cook, Belle, a faithful sister and co-worker of Elder J. Namesake's, showed me through the little church. It was Reverend Troublefield's own firm hand that had guided Belle to the light. Enquiring about the hole in the roof, I said:

'Belle, what do you do if it rains?'

'Law', Mr. Sam,' she said, 'we just moves up front.'

Belle's own life is divided into two definite parts: the first, when she was living in sin; the second, when she saw the light and became a 'pillar of the temple.' I am sure if the Lord could have tasted a piece of the chicken that Belle cooks at our house for Sunday dinners, he would have forgiven her her sins of the flesh then and there without having her go through the humiliation of arising in front of the congregation at the Avenging Angel and testifying in fact as to how she fell into carnal sin. Every time Belle lifts a chicken wing, browned and dripping with gravy, from the sizzling pan on the kitchen stove, she has further justified her living.

When I am at home between shows I sleep mornings and come down to a late breakfast which Belle serves to me on the sun porch. The family is usually out by the time I am down, and Belle has finished with her breakfast dishes. Belle has always nursed a great desire to leave the South and go North to work in Harlem. William Henry, our gardener, has a sister who runs a beauty parlor on 135th Street in New York, and Belle describes the things she sends home to William's mother as a 'caution.' Belle pays ten cents a week of her salary to the Hickory Nut Hill Burying Society, and when

William's brother-in-law, who was a bootlegger in Harlem, was brought home to be buried after having been shot to death in an uptown brawl — well, that settled it for Belle.

'God dog,' said Belle, 'if I could be buried that fine, I'd scrub all the way from here to that there Cotton Club.'

For several years we were worried for fear Belle might really leave. Mrs. Hattie Kornegay's cook and Mrs. Estelle English's cook had both gone and were writing back in glowing terms about riding right alongside of white folks in the subways and nobody saying anything about it. But every fall, after getting clothes for Christine and Doreethea to wear to school, and after deducting her insurance, she didn't have much left to go to New York on, and she always settled for a couple of weeks' time off in September to pick cotton. With her and Christine picking double, she could make the equivalent of four or five weeks' pay at her cooking salary. Several years of planning and failure and she abandoned the idea, but she never grew tired of plying me with questions about life in Harlem. Mornings at breakfast, between mouthfuls of Clarendon ham and eggs, I'd tell her about sin in the city.

'Do!' she'd say, and listen, open-mouthed.

'To testify' before the congregation is to confess one's sins. When a member of the Avenging Angel gets religion it is part of his belief to rise to his feet and 'pour out his soul to the Lord.'

One morning at breakfast Belle said she and Elder Troublefield had had a heart-to-heart talk about me and

sin in Harlem and they had decided that it was her Christian duty to retestify her sins for me that I might pass her story along to help any colored lamb whom I might see straying over towards the Devil's Pasture. Harlem was that vague to Belle, and this decision was due to the realization that she, herself, would probably never get there. From that breakfast on, I became the Avenging Angel Free Will African Baptist Church's own foreign missionary to Harlem. Amen.

Belle testified. Sincerely, sweetly; clutching the hem of her apron like some nervous school child reciting a piece before a classroom. At fourteen, she had wondered where all the girls along Kelly Street got the money to buy fine clothes; where their spending money for Saturday nights came from. On enquiring, she was told that if she would go to a certain Miss Katie's house on Kornegay Street, and if she would do exactly like Miss Katie told her, she, too, could have enough money to buy almost anything in McPhail's store.

Well, Belle did. And her first customer at Miss Katie's was a big, strapping buck who nearly tore her in two in his enthusiasm. Next day Belle was in such pain that she had to tell her mother, who not only gave her a sound thrashing, but also took away her two dollars.

Testimonials to the first part of Belle's life are two of the finest young daughters you ever saw. Christine is the first, fathered by a Negro contractor who had been brought to town by a local construction company to help build the new Methodist Church. The second,

by a brakeman working on the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Belle used to know his train schedule and she and little Doreethea would wave at him from their cabin door on Kelly Street on Tuesdays and Thursdays as his train went roaring through to Wilmington or Weldon. But that was in Belle's first life, before she became a 'pillar of the church,' and before her clear, loud soprano voice had won church 'sings' for Elder Troublefield in towns as far away as Warsaw and Fremont.

Reverend J. Namesake's Avenging Angel has grown so in strength and numbers that except for occasional 'tearooms,' which Belle describes as 'cesspools of iniquity where gals get into no good with out-of-town dates,' juke joints and back-room bootleg bars, it has become not only the religious but the social center of Hickory Nut Hill.

I sat one night in Elder J. Namesake's church with Elliott Clark and heard Sister Donie Hobbs, who in her pastor's words is a 'mockingbird and a water sister,' open up her mouth and let her soul pour out in song that left me breathless, it was so exciting. At Elder J. Namesake's bidding, she arose from the white-robed circle of co-workers, humbly gave obedience to the church, to the pastor, to the deacons, to the choir, to the co-workers, to the friends, visiting friends, white friends and likewise, and with a nod to the organist sang 'The Lord's Gonna Rain Down Fire' until the tears ran down her cheeks. A moment after she had finished I glanced at Elliott through my own tears in time to see him take out the fine white handkerchie that Miss Artis had tucked into his coat-pocket and blow his nose.

Elder J. Namesake's sermon that night was in honor of Elliott and me. After his white-robed followers had sung themselves into a state of exhaustion, he made his appearance through his study door, and opened his Bible to the appointed text. Late in the sermon, Elliott observed that the Bible had been upside down all evening.

However, Reverend Troublefield took his text and preached for two hours and a half, supported by 'amen talk' from the deacons and co-workers, to the effect that 'If a man has joy in his soul he shall reap corn to eat and corn to sell.'

Along about eleven-thirty Elliott and I left. The congregation was still going strong and the choir was bursting with song. Elder J. Namesake escorted us to the door. As he told us good night he turned toward his choir and proudly said:

'Look at my choir, Mr. Sammy. Maybe they cain't sing, but I've got the best-lookin' bunch of yaller gals this side of New Orleans.'

Not so fortunate as Elder J. Namesake was the self-ordained Reverend Joshua Simmons, of Simmons Hall. Simmons Hall is the only apartment-house building in Hickory Nut Hill. It is so dilapidated and is in such bad repair that it is practically uninhabitable. It is used mostly to house potato-pickers from Florida, who are brought there in the summertime to harvest the local crops. I once followed the volunteer fire department's truck to the Hill in answer to an alarm. It was Simmons Hall. Unfortunately, it did not burn down. I remember seeing a fattish girl come running out of the

smoke-filled hallway carrying a tin plate in her hands. It was her noonday dinner and the only thing she had thought to save in her excitement.

The lower floor of this ramshackly wooden hall is an assembly room, after a fashion. Reverend Simmons, before his ordination, had been an ordinary field laborer, blessed with some imagination and an ambition to be a preacher. This ambition had been fanned considerably by the startling success of Elder J. Namesake's *Avenging Angel*. When an aunt who had 'gone Nawth' to Philadelphia died, Joshua fell heir to this monstrous bit of property.

It took him less than two weeks to receive a direct call from the Holy Spirit. Ordainment was simple: he ordained himself, at the Lord's command. Rows of wooden benches were moved into the assembly part of his new property, and he announced to Hickory Nut Hill's gullible populace the founding of the 'There Shall Be No Death' Cult.

There shall be no death! Well, now; that made sense. Nobody wanted to die, and if this new religion really worked Brother Simmons had something. Anyway, it was worth a try, and not wanting to trifle with their luck, people flocked to The Simmons Hall There Shall Be No Death African Baptist Church, Reverend Joshua Simmons, Elder and Prophet.

Fired with success, Reverend Joshua boycotted death completely. Collections went fine, until an unforeseen event suddenly wrecked the prophet's career: his wife died. Completely. Absolutely. Dead as hell.

Joshua was stunned at his sudden misfortune. His

wife was a low-down, unfaithful, ungrateful dog to play a mean trick like that on him right when he had the whole world in the palm of his hand. Why, things were going so well that he had planned to go abroad throughout the land and found churches as far away as Calypso and Magnolia and Clinton. She didn't have any right to up and die on him like that, goddamit, and he hauled off and smacked her right in the jaw. He no sooner hit her than he had a vision. He saw the whole plan of things; as plain as the nose on his dead wife's face. The Lord worked in wondrous ways His miracles to perform.

Joshua called a big mass meeting at Simmons Hall for that night. At eight-thirty a miracle would be performed by the prophet. The little incident of his wife's death had been arranged to demonstrate to his faithful followers his newest and greatest power: that of raising the dead. Who was there more fitted for this great demonstration than the prophet's own lamb, his companion, his helpmate — his wife?

By seven o'clock every seat in Simmons Hall was taken. By eight o'clock the crowds were so thick that you couldn't get within a block of the place. Reverend Simmons was going to raise the dead. Amen.

Half-hidden back of a post, sweating and mumbling to himself, was Elder Troublefield of the Avenging Angel, his thunder completely stolen, gone.

In front of the pulpit, resplendent in a white robe and with a lily resting in her dead hands, lay the corpse of Ethelda Simmons. From this night evermore it was to be simply Ethelda and Lazarus. Amen.

At eight-fifteen, the *There Shall Ever Be Light* Choir sang 'Arise and Shine,' and a new hymn written especially for the occasion, called, 'Listen While I Tell You What It's Like.'

Well, presently there he was. His eyes rolled back as if in prayer, or as they later said, because he was scared to death; and a great hush fell over the congregation.

At a nod of his head, the choir began a low and mournful chant. The miracle was about to begin. Elder Joshua raised his hands wide over Ethelda's body. In his far corner back of the post, Elder J. Namesake broke out into a cold chill and started muttering in an unknown tongue.

'Ethelda, Sister, rise!'

There was a moment of nerve-wracking silence.

'Ethelda, Sister, arise!'

Every eye was glued to the lily in Ethelda's hands, but it didn't move.

'Do you hear me, Sister, arise!'

Evidently, Sister Ethelda hadn't heard, and as the Reverend Simmons raised his voice louder and louder, first a sort of mumbling noise went through the congregation, and then somebody in the back laughed. The tension had been too great, and like an inexperienced actor in a too-emotional scene, Joshua lost his audience; and as a ripple of laughter started throughout the Hall, he burst forth into a tirade of muscular antics and profanity the like of which I doubt his flock had seen before or since.

'Ethelda, get up!' he screamed at the top of his lungs.



Then suddenly, with a powerful swing of his foot, he sent the dead sister's body, lily, sheets and all, out into the front rows of his horrified congregation.

Turning quickly, he sent the splintered pieces of his pulpit sailing over the heads of his choir with his other foot and ran out the rear door. At the corner he hopped a potato truck bound for Wallace, or maybe it was Hastings. Some say one place and some the other.

# part two

*Ride a Golden Sunbeam*





*The spring sun is warm in North Carolina. Farmers say it draws the cotton seeds out of the ground and makes the spindly plants turn southward. If you lose your way, you can study a cottonfield and it will head you south.*

I was losing my way. Or maybe I was seeing the way too clearly. I don't know. Anyway, I awoke one morning and the dancing dots of sunlight across my bed were sweeping southward, beckoning southward. They told me what I wanted to know; it was time to go on.

Mr. Abb Pickett had come by for me the night before. He thought he knew where he could lay his hands on a prime smoked ham that Belle would enjoy cooking for me. Old Man James had just one ham left and taxes came due pretty soon. So maybe he'd sell the ham.

Used to be that folks would fight for a James ham. The old man didn't cure many in his little smokehouse, but he cured them with loving care just for himself and Allie. Allie was his wife. One winter night Allie decided she couldn't stand the misery in her head any longer and she sneaked out the shotgun and blew the back of her head all over the side yard. Everybody was mighty sorry for Old Man James but he didn't seem to take it to heart too much. He just grew kind of careless and forgetful about things and he didn't bother about work much any more. He'd still cure a ham or two, but one of the neighbor boys had to do the slaughtering and cutting up and dressing of the

meat. Old Man James would go away for a few days until hog-killing was over.

Well, I went out to Old Man James's with Mr. Abb and it was a sorry sight. I wished afterwards I hadn't gone, because I remembered the old man so well as a hearty, blustery old fellow with a thousand jokes to tell before he'd let you even look in his smokehouse door. He'd changed. Now he was a vague, gray, pitiful shadow. An old man, as he had always seemed to me, but broken completely.

I'd been seeing too many sights like that — old families gone, old homes converted to strange new uses, change and decay. At first all the changes were merely interesting and exciting, but now I had been home long enough to feel the undercurrents instead of just seeing the outside of things. Yes, it was time to move on.

Anyway, I had planned to move on eventually to my other small-town home in the South — to Onora Valley in Florida. When I was fourteen and my mother married again and moved to Florida, I hated to go. It was like moving to the ends of the earth. But fourteen is an adjustable age and the new life was just as exciting as the old.

The dancing patterns of the sun streaming through the crêpe myrtle outside my bedroom window were drawing me on southward and I left that afternoon for Onora Valley. It was not easy to go, but it would have been harder to stay.

Now, Onora Valley lies straight down the sun; you ride a golden sunbeam southward from the Carolina cottonfields and you skim along the Sea Level Route

through the low-country marshes and over the red rivers of Georgia and presently you are in Jacksonville and Florida and you travel on and on until the fresh, pungent smell of celery and the fresh green of the celery tops stretching off to the horizon tell you that this is the celery kingdom of the United States and Onora Valley lies in its heart.

I rode, I sniffed the elixir air that seemed to carry all of spring and the growing vegetable world with it, I scanned the familiar backdrop of palm-dotted cypress woods and silver thread of the St. John's River, and once again I knew I was home.

*The spring sun is hot in Florida. The celery-growers say it will cook you if you stay out in it too long. You have to know when to go out in the sun and when to come in from the sun; if you stay too long it will dry you up.*



## SIX

### *Obituary of an Era*

MY OLD friend Scharfhausen is the last green leaf on an old dead tree. Left high and dry in his little house at the edge of the sixth green of the St. Andrews golf course by the backwash of the Florida real estate boom, he sits hours on end on his front porch, strumming the strings of his zither with his good hand and watching the habits of the gophers in the sand traps. His deaf wife, afflicted with what he describes as an 'energy leak,' talks incessantly in a loud voice to prove to herself that she can still hear.

St. Andrews was the completed unit of a six-million-dollar boom project, dedicated Mount Plymouth, which proposed to make a five-thousand-acre cattle ranch the golf center of America. There were to be two other courses. Gleneagle was laid out by golf-course architects hide-and-seek style through deep valleys and a chain of small lakes, and one hundred and fifty goats were imported to furnish 'scientific manure' for the greens to prevent the growth of weeds and tough grass. Gleneagle reached the stage of surveyor's stakes, but



the third course was only a set of fine white lines on the blue plot of the golfer's paradise.

A three-hundred-thousand dollar hotel-clubhouse with a hundred and fifty rooms, ballroom, rambling verandas, swimming pool and bowling lawns was erected 'upon the summit of the loftiest hill' — the term 'lofty' meaning about thirty feet high.

In this sports community of the world, the home-owner, for the price of a lot ranging in cost from five hundred and fifty to two thousand dollars, could enjoy the finest golfing, polo, trap-shooting, sky-motoring, water sports, quail shooting and bass fishing in the South. Taxi your own plane to the hotel. Free dues for twenty-one years, saving three thousand dollars or twice and three times the cost of the lot, made possible by the creation of an endowment fund which provided that a certain amount be set aside out of the sale of each lot, the income from the fund to maintain the courses.

Boulevards and avenues and driveways wound in and out of the scrub pines of the St. Andrews sections. Bridle paths followed the fairways where play might be observed from horseback. Light and water and telephone systems were installed. Sidewalks shot straight out through the Florida sand. Sections, lots, farm sites. Five-dollar bills were tossed by the fistfuls off gaily colored bandwagons to attract the busloads of prospective home-owners who had been met at the special trains in Onora Valley, Orlando, Mount Dora and Apopka.

'I consider the Mount Plymouth development the

finest in the state. It is without a peer. I feel tremendously honored by being associated with such a wonderful and magnificent enterprise,' said Honus Bradford, crack Florida East Coast salesman, who had been brought from Miami especially to handle the home-site sales.

Land that had been bought for ten dollars an acre was suddenly the 'Switzerland of Florida.'

'Thirty minutes from thirty towns.'

'Dedication October 1, 1926 — The Shot Heard 'Round The World.'

Former clerks who had never made more than fifty dollars a week were shooting golf at fifty dollars a hole.

A ten-acre section which had cost fifty cents an acre, and was assessed at \$5 on the tax books, sold for \$500 at eight in the morning. At nine o'clock the original owner bought it back for \$700 and sold it immediately for \$900. At noon it changed hands for \$1200. In the early afternoon the original owner paid \$1300 to get it back and sold it again at four for \$1500. All transactions on paper. Paper everywhere, and Mount Plymouth and all of Florida was drunk with the taste of money, the feel of money. Everything jumped a hundred times its value. In Onora Valley, 'thirty minutes away,' our old house on First Street changed hands seven times in a week — on paper. My Uncle Arthur's new yacht, the *Margaret Z*, danced at its mooring in the new basin off the Municipal Pier. General Motors sent photographers to Onora Valley to take pictures of the family lined up in front of our five Buicks. I wore knickers and stood in front of the station wagon.

'Station-wagon society' came into its own, and when I 'easy-breezed' up in front of the drugstore in 'Old Ironsides,' George Knight's well-placed riding boot against the brand-new treads and his 'Some sled you got. What is it, a Dort?' took me down a peg.

On paper, Mount Plymouth looked even more promising than most of the rainbow-ends which were being promoted all over Florida. Old Gus Scharfhausen, who gave me my first shave in a barber shop, was inspired by the enthusiasm of its promoters, whom he shaved every morning in his place in Onora Valley. Gus had shaved the best of the winter visitors in Onora for thirty-three years, and Connie Mack always gave him a dollar tip. If Mr. Carl Dann, who had developed sixty pieces of property whose purchasers had realized two hundred to four thousand per cent on their investments, had chosen Mount Plymouth for his sixty-first baby, it made sense to Gus to cash in his chips and get in on the ground floor. So on the morning that Mr. Dann, lulled by Gus's own special hot towel and bay rum after-shave treatment, confided that it was no longer a question whether Mount Plymouth would or would not be a profitable venture for those who purchased, but whether it would lead the other sixty or just keep up the average, his mind was made up.

Fifteen years ago that was, that Gus made up his mind to sell his shop and take his savings and buy lake-front lots and home sites in the St. Andrews section.

A week of my visit to Onora Valley had passed before his postcard came: 'I see by the papers you got big. Can you come out? — Gus.'

We sat on the steps of his cottage, a 'Stoltz-styled house with a storybook roof,' watching the glorious spectacle of a Florida sun reddening to set in the haze of a smouldering scrub-pine fire. The crimson glow burned along the hill-line where the third golf course would have been, if . . .

Phlox grew wild along the unkempt fairways. Sandspur thrived in patches on the greens. The pines along the bridle paths were scarred and blackened from unchecked forest fires. No mockingbirds sang in the huckleberry thickets. A blacksnake slithered through the weeds to seize a squeaking field mouse, the only sign of life. The sunset silhouetted the hotel on its thirty-foot hill. Its cement fountains were cracked and green. The sides of the swimming pool had caved in and weeds grew waist-high through the breaks in the asphalt driveway. Boards and browned newspapers covered the veranda windows and the winds wept through the crumbling Green Room in the north wing. There it towered: the tombstone of a dream.

Right there on the front page of volume 1, number 1, of *The Mount Plymouth Driver* in Gus's good hand it said: 'Gus Scharfhausen has built a handsome and modern barber shop and is now doing business. Mr. Scharfhausen has been well known in Onora Valley for years. He was first interested in Mount Plymouth from purely an investment standpoint. He has disposed of some of his property at considerable profit.'

Gus tossed the newspaper over onto his zither and took a long pull at his beer.

'Yes, sir,' he said, 'it was a time. The whole thing' fell apart when everybody tried to cash in their paper for money. When I sold out and came here it was something. There was so much traffic over there on Number One that a red light in Onora caused a jam dang near to here. Every empty field that didn't have a fancy archway and an auction stand was a tourist camp. I was knocking off forty dollars a week and tips with one chair in the hotel, and when it closed for the season after the first three months, I paid me seventeen thousand dollars for a store in the business block. Then I bought me this house with the fancy roof over m'head.' I was the envy of all my friends. Old Gus was in on the ground floor. I bought me two more stores and rented them to the grocer and the furniture dealer. I bought me a filling station out there on the old Orlando Road. But Mr. Dann, he let me down. He underestimated the cost, he started too late in the boom to gain momentum, and when she began to wobble and he found himself short on dough, the stockholders in the hotel wouldn't ante up any more. So the great big old thing you see sitting there through the trees sold on the block for eighteen thousand dollars.

'Then everybody began moving away. Mr. Perry — he first owned this cow pasture — he foreclosed on the Gleneagle and the land that was going to be number three golf course, and Mr. Maxey, from Detroit, he foreclosed on St. Andrews for the fifty thousand he loaned the hotel company to install the fire-sprinkler system.

'Mr. Maxey, he just sat tight. He had a little cottage

on the development and he liked the place. When the hotel needed the sprinkler money Mr. Maxey gave it for a mortgage on the golf course. When the hotel was auctioned off for taxes it was Mr. Maxey bought it in, and it was Mr. Maxey paid half price for the sixty thousand dollars' worth of furnishings. Why, the water-works alone cost the holding company thirty-two thousand dollars to install. So for a hundred and thirteen thousand dollars he got him a hotel and furnishings and a golf course and some lakes. Then he and old Perry couldn't get along, so he bought out Perry and he had him a thousand acres more. Now I guess he's Pope Plymouth with a great big fine front porch to sit on and spit and a long old dining-room with plenty of room for his nigras to pass him things.

'Me? I had my stroke about the time you started bouncing that ball against the side of the house in "Tobacco Road." I sold one of my stores to a junk dealer for seven hundred dollars and I just boarded the other two up. My filling station was ruined when the new road to Orlando left it sitting off there by itself in the woods. I'm seventy-three now. Even if I lost my house for taxes nobody would buy it, away out here and all. I tried to rent it to anybody for fifty-five a month. I figgered we could move into the back of one of the stores, but we didn't have no luck. My wife's mother died and we figgered we'd get a little there, but by the time the estate was cut twenty ways between brothers and sisters and cousins, it wasn't nothing to speak of. Now and again somebody drives up through the sand and asks me to help him locate a lot he bought here

back in '26. 'Tween times I just sit here and watch my gophers in the sand traps. Dern near like prehistoric animals, gophers. I don't worry none. I find nicer people among the common herd, anyway — they're more democratic than the rich.'

The sun had long since dropped behind the ridge where number three course was to have sprawled, and an enormous moon was peering over Mr. Maxey's orange grove like the fat, foolish face of a boom-time investor. I left Gus and his zither and his copy of *The Mount Plymouth Driver* on the steps of his 'Stoltz-styled' cottage and started my car. In the creamy glow of moonlight, there was still some magic left in the old dream. No lights, no music, no laughter burst from the windows of the great hotel, but its gaunt despair was cloaked in kindly shadows and its very bulk was eloquent of sure success. Through the quiet moonlight I rode toward the black wings of the arch that towered as high as a three-storey house — a fantastic but somehow, in the moonlight, an impelling and imposing monument to folly. Nearing the turn of the road under the arch, I switched on my lights and rolled out past the lath-filled holes where the stucco had fallen away.

Out on the highway I headed south for the Hand Ranch below Kissimmee, where I was to spend the week-end. I took the old road down back around Apopka and through Ocoee and Windemere and Vine-land. The old road is a typical ghost road of the boom, lined with relics of promoters' imagination. Crumbling remains of elegant entrances to flat plains that were to

be converted into cities; marshlands that were to be channeled into Venetian canals; Dreamwolds; Bel-Air, 'The Subdivision Beautiful'; a maze of fancy names and fancier schemes built on twenty-five dollars cash and easy monthly payments. One and all, they crashed when people stopped paying their installments and Miami began running out certain types of Northern promoters.

This side of Kissimmee I recognized a stretch of familiar road, and a fence, and a little farther on I turned into a driveway and stopped in front of the old Rucker mansion. There wasn't a light anywhere in the house, and when I walked across the grass to the steps a 'no-fence law' cow shied away and disappeared into the night.

There was a board nailed to a column and when I struck a match and leaned against it to read 'For Sale — Jackson Realty Co.,' flakes of dried paint peeled away under the touch of my hand.

I rested against the side of the car a moment before I got in and drove away. I closed my eyes and saw Rucker's daughter leading the spring prom at the Phi Delt' house at Florida. With her ivory skin and slick black hair, Mary Lane was the prettiest thing you ever saw, and the stag line at her elbow was five yards long.

I remembered a New Year's Eve when we were dancing in the ballroom, the room that Rucker bragged was 'ninety feet long and big enough for Mary Lane to get around in.' A fire broke out in the kitchen and I helped carry furniture out on the lawn. It was during Prohibition and Rucker had stored cases of bonded



whisky in his cellar. Carter, the Ruckers' Negro, worked the hardest saving the whisky, and when the fire had been extinguished without any great damage having been done to the house, he carefully packed the cases away downstairs. Our own Negroes at home have always been such a well-fed, amiable lot that I have never lent much of an ear to the home missionaries who worry about the betterment of the race, but I remember my feeling of disgust next afternoon when I read in the paper about Carter's sister. The police raided Kissimmee's Negro section on New Year's Eve and Carter's sister was sent up for six months for having a bottle of corn whisky in her possession.

When I asked in town about the Ruckers, they told me the old man lost most everything he had when the boom collapsed. The house went for taxes and when he died it turned out to be another case of paper in the bank. Mary Lane's husband runs a filling station in a small town a few miles away.

Later that night, sitting on the steps at the Hand Ranch, we were talking about my friends, the Ruckers and the Scharfhausens, and a Florida cowboy came down from the porch and joined in. The sun had burned his skin so black and bleached his hair so blond that sitting there talking in the moonlight, he looked like one of those trickily lit musical comedy characters whose feet and hands dance around on a darkened stage without their bodies. He said he guessed his brother was about the only fellow who came out of the boom with more money than he put in it.

'My brother bought him one of them waterfront lots

down on the East Coast back in '26, but when he rode down on the bus to see it the tide was in and he missed it,' he laughed. 'Some reason or 'nother he always kept up his taxes on it, though. Well, last year, with all this defense work goin' on, two men come down from the North to pick up some cheap land around the projects and build housin'. My brother's lot was right in the middle of the land they wanted to fill in with dirt sucked up from the bay. They bought a lot of land for back taxes or from people who lived God knows where and were tickled to death to get anythin' at all for their derved old lots. But not Buddy. He decided he didn't want to sell, and there his lot sat, right in the middle of all the dirt-suckin' and buildin'. The men argued with Buddy that his lot was under water and what did he want with it, but Buddy said he guessed he liked his lot under water. He nearly drove them guys crazy turnin' down their offers, and then when he figgered the time was ripe, he added what the lot had cost him, plus the depreciation from the tide comin' in and goin' out over it and a decent profit, and he sold 'er. Buddy always was smart like that, waitin' and figgerin'. He won't never be no damned cow hand.'

Out there in the fragrant moonlight, we talked for hours about the most fantastic of the boom schemes — the saga of Inter-Ocean City. Parts of the story I remembered, and parts of it new to me must have stirred pretty bitter memories among two or three of my friends, but they were far enough away from it now to look back and marvel at themselves.

In the summer of 1925 a New York engineer named

W. A. White, who had had a hand in developing some properties along the east coast of Florida, persuaded a banker from Fort Lauderdale to finance him in the creation of a city. Together they formed the Florida Tropics Development Company, and proposed 'to cause to blossom forth from the virgin land of Florida a city that gives promise of being second to none in the central section of the state.'

They adopted a motto: 'By their deeds ye shall know them.'

Six miles west of Kissimmee on the Dixie Highway, midway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, they made a deal for ten thousand acres of ordinary Florida scrub-pine, cypress-pond land, and Inter-Ocean City was born. The land was laid out checkerboard style on paper and the original owner was paid part cash down, the balance to be paid in installments on the sale of each unit. The community was divided into five sections: A, business district; B and C, residential sections; D, industrial; and E, farm lands.

A bond issue of a hundred thousand dollars financed the laying off of streets and curbings and the installation of water mains and an electric-light system. The streets were seventy-five feet wide, lined with lamps for a White Way. A railroad terminal switch was laid, and a first unit of fifty small farms carved out of the woods. A hotel with eighty rooms, an administration building with five stores and numerous offices, a restaurant, a lumber yard, sales buildings and storage warehouses were contracted for.

Stucco bungalows sprang up through the piney woods

and a thousand tiny red flags fluttered lot numbers. Full-page advertisements ran in the *Saturday Evening Post* and in the newspapers of the larger Eastern cities.

Associate sales offices for the handling of residential, industrial, agricultural and recreational properties in Inter-Ocean City were opened in Onora Valley, Melbourne and a dozen larger Florida cities and in Chattanooga, Allentown, Baltimore and New York.

In August of 1925 the initial sale of lots set something of a record — a hundred and twenty-seven lots sold for a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars the first morning. By October 1 the price of these same lots had been advanced one hundred per cent, and with the disposing of the first unit the Country Club section was placed on the market. By the end of the month resales of section A gave purchasers a profit of more than five hundred per cent in less than three months.

A section was sold to an automobile and truck manufacturer. A golf course was half completed and the first fleet of buses arrived to carry prospective settlers from the branch offices direct to the operations.

Arrangements were made with a farm agency to handle the sale of five- and ten-acre tracts. To make them more attractive to prospecting farmers, the units were fenced, outbuildings erected, the cottages furnished, necessary implements laid out in the barn, and two acres were plowed, ready for planting. Near-by the bedazzled agriculturist might gaze on 'a model farm which will demonstrate the possibilities of the soil and enable the farmer to plant the crop that will yield the best returns without having to go to the trouble of

'On the Dixie,' a tourist camp of fifty cabins was laid out, and a motion-picture palace was rushed through to entertain the tourists.

By the middle of November sales passed the million-dollar mark. Lots could be bought in the outlying swamps for as low as three hundred dollars, but the average price ran from twenty-five hundred dollars to three thousand. The one hundred thousand dollars realized from the sale of city bonds had been spent in improvement programs and the project was coasting along on the ten and twenty per cent down payments on the real estate. Nine Inter-Ocean City corporations were operating in the field.

In answer to the most pertinent question, 'How's the bathing?' the Florida Tropics Development Company announced plans for the construction of the world's largest Aquatic Amphitheatre. An oval building of Moorish architecture would be built about half a mile off the Dixie Highway. The size of the structure would be some eight hundred by four hundred and fifty feet, while the pool proper would measure seven hundred and fifty by three hundred and fifty feet. The giant oval, according to the *Inter-Ocean City Herald*, would be surrounded with a classic continuation of arches, with a low, almost flat roof, sloping away from the center. These arches would serve as a sun shade for the spectators and would be supplied with comfortable seating arrangements. Back of this resting space would be dressing-rooms for the bathers and parking spaces for their automobiles. At the four corners Moorish minarets would relieve the straight line. A miniature island

would occupy the center of the giant pool, with a solarium and a canopied rest room. Venetian gondolas would ride within the pool and a particularly large one would be a floating bandstand from which stringed instruments would furnish music for the swimmers, and on gala occasions for dancing on the portico. Three artesian wells guaranteed fresh water at all times, and the concrete sides of the pool would be finished in tile to suggest the famous baths of ancient Rome.

Six miles of cypress ponds and swamps lay between Inter-Ocean City and Lake Tohopekaliga and its inland waterway of smaller lakes to Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee. A rail spur connected the development to the main line of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, and a right of way to Tohopekaliga would make Inter-Ocean City the logical shipping point for produce and citrus fruits from the inland South to the Northern markets, not to mention the yachting possibilities for sportsmen.

The cypress swamps stood from two inches to six feet under water, but if they were drained the muck land along the canals would be the finest farming land in the state and the sale of the farm tracts would pay the cost of dredging. So the Florida Tropics Development Company paid one hundred dollars an acre for a hundred-and-forty-acre strip extending from the proposed yacht basin in the city to Shingle Creek. A canal was opened through the swamps, lowering the water into the creek, which in turn was widened along its three-mile course to the lake.

Tractors and bulldozers converted a pine field into

an airport that residents of Inter-Ocean City might come and go by any of four ways — by air, by yacht, by train, or by automobile.

The first setback came when, without explanation, the truck manufacturer called off work on his factory and abandoned plans for centering his operations in Inter-Ocean City. The truck was a popular, low-cost, speedy road-builder's model and White was to have been its sales agent with offices in a dozen or more Florida cities. It meant the loss of several hundred population and thousands of dollars' worth of favorable advertising for Inter-Ocean City.

Here and there people were not making payments on their lots and they were reverting to the company. Congested conditions on the railroads were delaying shipments of building supplies. There were unpaid legal fees amounting to twenty-seven thousand dollars. Certain of the corporations could not meet the installments on their materials, and contracts on the Alhambra Apartments and the Administration Building were defaulted. Rumors came drifting up from Miami and the East Coast that the boom was on the wane.

But after an emergency meeting of the board of directors a 'guarantee with a kick in it' was issued in connection with the development. This guarantee claimed an actual cash background, with money in the bank, and was issued as warranty to the purchaser of any property through the Florida Tropics Development Company that all promises, either as written into contracts or appearing on its plats, would be carried out to the letter. The statement was issued mainly to spike

the clamorings of the original bondholders for their money, and Promoter White hurried North to arrange a million-dollar bond issue. This second issue would pay off the first one hundred thousand and leave nine hundred thousand dollars to ride out the 'lull' in the boom.

In Buffalo a brokerage house agreed to underwrite the million-dollar loan, but during the negotiations its president was taken ill, and before he recovered enough to complete the deal the lull had turned into a collapse and it was too late.

While White was waiting around Buffalo for his million-dollar angel to recover, he heard rumors of a scientific miracle going on over in Lockport, New York. A nineteen-year-old farmer boy had turned inventor and was making gasoline out of water. With a half-finished city on his hands, with his last financial hope sick in bed and with the boom rapidly skidding out from under him, White, who a month or two earlier would have laughed at the idea, hurried to Lockport to see if there was any possible chance that the story might be true. In the back of his promoter's mind was the wild idea that he might gain control of the farmer boy and his new secret process. It would be the easiest thing in the world to convert the half-built truck factory into a gasoline distillery, and there was enough water standing in his undrained swamps to supply the country. Hell, it would be a cinch. The oil factories would be centered in Inter-Ocean City, under government protection of course, because the success of the new process would revolutionize the economic system of the United States.



W. J. Steed, who had been attorney for the Florida Tropics Development Company, contributed a chapter that was new to me.

'When I got the telegram to take the first train North to legalize the miracle that was about to save Inter-Ocean City, I naturally thought White had got some banker drunk enough to underwrite the loan and I breathed easier about my unpaid fees,' he said.

'White met me at the train and I've never seen a man so excited. He bundled me into a car he said was running on water-gasoline and he took me out to a run-down farmhouse outside Lockport. White was about to burst with excitement. He took me into a shed and introduced me to a gangling country kid. The boy was messing around a lot of motors and generators and things. A huge hogshhead sort of a barrel was in the middle of the shed. The kid carried in fresh water from a well in the yard and dumped it into the barrel. It was water, all right. I tasted it. Then he backed an old Pierce-Arrow up to the door and drained its gasoline tank on the ground. He started up the machinery in the shed and dropped two copper-looking electrodes into the water and we waited while the needle on a meter swung from zero over to twelve. That was the sign when the water had turned to gasoline, so this crazy kid turns the motor off, pours a bucketful of the water into the tank, and White drives off down the road shouting like a red Indian! And the boy just stood there grinning at me like a billikin.

'I saw it, but by God, I didn't believe it, and I made 'em do it again and again and then on a tractor and

finally I said to myself — “Edison, Whitney, Fulton, why the hell not?” and started doing things about it.

‘The boy was an orphan and an illegitimate one at that. He’d lived on the farm with the middle-aged couple there as long as he could remember. He was nineteen and under age, and I had the couple made his legal guardians so there would be somebody to sign the contracts. The court approved them and out of the deal the boy agreed to disclose his process, for fifty-one per cent of all profits in a company to be formed for the manufacture of the new gasoline, and White and I were to get our cut out of the financing’s forty-nine per cent. Inter-Ocean City was to be the seat of all operations.

‘The growing importance of the thing got White so worked up that he flew to Washington and spilled the story to the Secretary of the Navy, who turned a government laboratory over to us and arranged to witness a demonstration. We brought the boy down from the country and put him up in the finest suite in the Willard Hotel and White and I called the Secretary of the Navy and told him we were ready.

‘Well, sir, that son-of-a-gun of a crazy kid got drunk and stayed drunk for two whole weeks. We finally got him sober enough to ask him what in the hell was the matter. He claimed the equipment wasn’t right for his demonstration, so White went out and bought him several thousand dollars’ worth of fancier gears and tubes, and the boy only got drunker. Finally the Secretary of the Navy got mad and said we were trying to make a fool out of him, and the boy said if that was

the way the Government felt about his invention he wouldn't demonstrate it again for any of us. We couldn't do a thing with him — couldn't even sober him up. So, hell, we just called the whole thing off and everybody went home.

'White's miracle cost him twenty-five thousand dollars and I lost a couple of my best clients by being away from my work. In Inter-Ocean City we tried to pick up the pieces, but when the lawsuits started White disappeared. There was a rumor from somewhere that he lost his mind, but a traveling salesman from here caught a glimpse of a pretty sane White in Tallahassee in 1934. Then he promoted a silver mine down in Mexico, and one day in 1938 when he had a ten-thousand-dollar payroll in his car he was robbed and beaten so badly about the head that he was laid up in a hospital for a year.

'His banker backer from Lauderdale is dead, and the only thing I ever got out of the whole Inter-Ocean mess was thirty-two dollars apiece down payment on a handful of lots I owned along Shingle Creek. The company bought 'em when they got the inland waterway bug.'

'Who owns the pieces?' I asked.

'The farmer who owned the land originally foreclosed his first mortgage on the land before the wolves could move in. He took one look around his ghost town and deeded the whole works to Miss Ossie England and her Household of Faith. They intercede for God. Miss Ossie made a Bible training school out of the hotel and changed the name of the place to Inter-Cession City.

Stop by and she'll show you around. It's worth a few minutes of your time.'

A few days later I stopped to read a roadside sign: 'Just Ahead — Inter-Cession City — Missionary Training School. City Lots and Acreage. Hot Coffee, Groceries, Gas, Oil, Shower Bath. Speed Limit 30 M.P.H. Our motto: "Obey God."'

I found Miss Ossie in her office in the hotel building.

'We reclaimed the city from the wilderness. We cut down the scrubby palmettoes and burned the brush off the streets. Down there by the sawmill we've even got one street lamp to burn.'

The sawmill was in the hollow shell of one of the stucco stores. The stairs to the apartments above had caved in, and the shed over the model T engine which ran the saws was propped up with pine poles.

'Most folks called it a haunted city, but there wasn't enough walls left to make an echo, and anybody who knows anything at all about haints knows they've got to have echoes,' Miss Ossie laughed.

The White Way survives in two rows of lampless iron posts. The water tower by the construction camp leans in the wind at a sharper angle than the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The twin apartment houses are two sets of roofless walls. A huge and rusty cement-mixer is permanently imbedded in the sand on the arcade lawn. Fifteen or so tumbledown bungalows rot in the pines and hunters stumble over the cement curbings through the woods.

'We feed a hundred people here at the Inter-Cession Biblical College. There are sixty missionary students

here, and children from our orphanage in the mountains of West Virginia go to grade school and spend the winters here in the Florida sun. The rest are mission workers who wear blue uniforms like this one I have on.'

The loud clanging of a hand-rung bell brought children running down the stairs and sliding down the great stairway from their class rooms to the dining-hall.

'Our food is simple, but it's good. Our children grow on it, and we have strength to pray. Won't you stay and have dinner with us?'

But I had to be on my way. On the road toward Onora Valley and the North, I passed a sign that bids you come back to Inter-Cession City, and the reminder: 'Prayer Changeth Things.'

On the way back I drove down a side road to see a famous gravestone in a churchyard near Winter Park. It is the tombstone of a man who was swindled in a real estate deal during the boom. Following the instructions in his will, the names of his swindlers and the amounts of money they stole were engraved on the back of the stone. When I saw it all the names but two had been chiseled away, and maybe those two debts have been paid by now.

# seven

## *Children of the Boom*

OVER a back table in the lake-front juke, Craig, an old friend of mine, was reweaving the tragic web of his life since I had seen him last.

It was Saturday night. Fog and cigarette smoke and the smell of hamburgers frying in the kitchen blended into the familiar pattern of the new social life in a small Southern town. Jitterbug feet beat time to boogie-woogie from the nickelodeon. The tables around the dance floor were cluttered with 'dopes' and rum and wet straws smeared peppermint-candy-red with lipstick. The windows along the lake-front wall were thrown wide open so the curb-service guests could get the benefit of the 'boogie-beat.' Between nickels in the juke-box, sounds of muffled voices and drifts of radio music came from cars parked along the water's edge.

When Craig was in his cups, he always talked like the 'literary books' he liked to read.

'You bend an ear, my sober young frien', and listen to me. I'll show you a formula for frustration. I'm a contemporary of yours, see — a little drunk, it's true.

But that's my privilege, see, on account of I didn't bail out like you did, but stayed on in this goddam' town until I got all tangled up and twisted 'round those dead lamp posts rusting in the palmettoes.'

He arranged four glasses of straight whisky in front of him.

'Now, these,' he said, 'are the rosy-colored glasses through which I look at the world, and through 'em I see some mighty pretty things.'

He lifted one of the glasses in his hand.

'One to Maggie, one to Em'ry, one to Robin and one to me. Typical of our lost generation, yours and mine; children of the boom whose parents left us holding an inflated paper bag. May the escaping air blow their souls to hell! A bored dam' generation whose mammas and papas turned blue-nose with the failure of their goddam' boom and let us flounder 'round in our dilemma until we found release in the joy of each other's bodies and emerged from our moral depression one helluva lot of adolescent degenerates. Amen.'

Craig downed his drink at one gulp and reached into his pockets for five nickels to drop in the juke slot at the edge of the table.

I remembered the carpetbagger days of the boom. The vacant houses to let. The weeds and the wilderness that swallowed the maze of plots and lots and unpaved streets. In my schoolroom the empty seats of the children who had gone back home up North and out Middle West, and the bewildered lot of us who lived on in Onora Valley; and the sullen, undefinable cruelty that possessed us when we sensed the sudden piety of

the boom-makers. There was mute rebellion. My generation stumbled pellmell after a crazy Pied Piper, and his jangling music danced our abused, half-grown bodies into a frenzy. Child suicides and adolescent tragedies broke more parental hearts than the boom.

Little Virginia Ashley was one. Depression reduced her family to living-quarters in the tiny rooms above a garage and her father ran the small grocery store on the corner. He forbade her to see a young sweetheart who walked her home from school and held her hand in the afternoon movie. But she met him one afternoon at an appointed street corner and when a customer in the store innocently and offhandedly gave her tryst away, her father sent her home and to bed without supper. After closing time he hurried home with sandwiches and milk for her but he found her dead across her bed. She had shot herself through the heart with her father's rifle.

And Betty Dorn, who at fourteen found herself pregnant by her high-school lover. Fortunately her time came during the summer months and she visited an aunt in Alabama, who took the baby to raise. In the fall she entered school at the regular term, her blonde hair dyed a brilliant red as though to shake off the personality of her indiscreet youth. To her classmates she was 'that baby-having woman.'

Craig drank a Scotch to Betty's baby up in Alabama.

'I was playing tennis at the playground the afternoon poor little Edna Darby's blind strategy backfired in her heart. Hot Connors was on the court with me. Several weeks before, Edna and Hot had quarreled over his



dates with a girl in Orlando. The kid had cried and threatened to kill herself if he saw the Orlando girl again and so, as Hot explained it at the time, to teach her to mind her own business he had a date in Orlando that very night. When Edna found out, she tried to commit suicide, but the only deadly thing she could find in her house was roach poison. When her parents got to her they found her alive, but violently sick at her stomach. The kids at school heard about it, of course, and they nicknamed her Roachy. You know how it would be. Hot Connors was so embarrassed by the talk that he wouldn't have anything more to do with her.

'Well, I guess the kid figgered the only way she could face it was to see it through. I didn't pay much attention to her as she crossed the playground this afternoon I'm telling about. She just stood at the net watching Hot. The talk had sort of quieted down about the roach poison and I didn't think anything about her standing there until I saw her walk over to where Hot was about to serve and heard her say, "You didn't think I'd do it, did you?" and then she toppled over on the court. When we bent over her I could see there was a brown line sort of trickling down the corners of her mouth. The poor kid had taken iodine. We got her to the hospital in time to get her pumped out and saved. Storybooks would have had 'em in each other's arms by that time with Hot holding hands and sending flowers and all, but not him. He sent her word he didn't ever want to see her or speak to her again and for her to leave him alone. And they haven't till this day, and if one of them sees the other one coming down the street,

whoever sees the other first crosses over to the other side.

'Hell of a guy I am to be sitting here talking about other folk's mistakes, with all the dust I've had blown in my face. Makes you sort of want to cry, though, when you think of the young'ns — but mind you, none of your "Tobacco Road" stuff, those kids. Good honest stock. I can see Lance Owen right this minute, dashing across the school grounds with his cap and gown flying like a kite's tail behind him as the class marched down the school steps after the baccalaureate sermon. He'd missed the whole works and when Mr. McKay glowered down his glasses at him Lance said, "But my pigeons got out," and by golly, they had. Crown prince of the whole dern boom, that boy.'

Lance roomed with me at college and we did crazy things our sophomore year. We'd tie up the freshmen like a pack of bloodhounds and race them over blocks of books 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' style. We'd empty the pillow feathers into electric fans to make prop snow. There was a picture of William Sargent Kendall's 'Psyche' that I got free with a bottle of hair tonic, and I hung it over my desk because it looked just like the kid who lived down the street from me in Onora Valley. Lance knew how much I liked her, and when we were home for week-ends, which was just about every other one, he'd drive me by her house early Monday mornings and toot his horn good-bye for me. He had a car and I nearly won the best-dressed-boy rating at school that year wearing his clothes, though I didn't look much better in his dress suit than he did. Well, one day dur-

ing the heart of the boom, his father died and that put an end to all his week-ending with me in Miami and Atlanta. From the miserable shape the family's affairs were in, you'd think a few other people who were supposed to be right up there on the crest of things would have taken a glance through their own paper, but people don't act like that during a boom because that couldn't happen to them.

Lance was my best friend, so naturally little Psyche started reading him the letters I wrote back from my first road tour through the Middle West in 'Street Scene.' Then they started writing to me together, and then, Florida nights being what they are, all full of magic and stars, Lance forgot all about me one night and I got home in time for the christening. The baby was cute as pie and looked just like her, except for Lance's tipped-up nose. Lance, though, just wouldn't stay put somehow and he went barging off around the Cape in tramp steamers. He'd leave his wife and baby with her folks, who weren't making out any too well themselves. Once he was gone two years and that was when she got her divorce. Last year she was killed in an automobile wreck over on the beach at Daytona and her folks couldn't find Lance to let him know about the funeral because that week he was away marrying some girl up in Jersey. His new wife wouldn't let little Lance come live with them because his being around would remind Lance of things she wanted him to forget. One night I cried when I thought of Psyche being dead, but the moment I really weep for is when young Lance finds out that he was never wanted, anyway. I met Lance

in New York last year, in an air line office, and we exchanged addresses and promised to meet each other for lunch. Of course we never have, because you never do, somehow, in New York.

After the boom people set about fitting the broken pieces of their lives into some kind of working order. Readjustment was not too hard for the farmers and the older people who had made a comfortable living out of the soil before the boom instead of 'prettying it up to sell to the Yankees,' as one celery grower put it.

The crack salesmen of the boom were the younger men, mostly just graduated from colleges or in the prime of their thirties. The glibness of their enthusiastic tongues, the smartness of their knickers and the speed of their flashy cars gave to the subdivisions the excitement of football stadia. These were the lads who sold the under-water lots. And nights they were the 'station-wagon society' of the country clubs. They retrenched to the tune of the last of the ten-dollar Scotch and then in droves they moved in on the bootleg joints and white Florida corn.

'Some of us wanted to take a bath and wash ourselves clean of the whole mess, but either the old crowd wouldn't let us or we didn't have the personal guts to kick them out of our lives. None of us had the guts Sarah Stephens had,' Craig went on after another round of drinks.

Sarah Stephens' father made a living hauling people's trunks and furniture in his big truck. He ran the town dray.

'Sarah was young and full with life and loved to

dance and have a good time. She was adopted by Reg Neil and that fast crowd and somehow she got money to buy clothes and things that her father couldn't afford to give her, so people began calling her a butterfly and she got a reputation for scattering her love.

'Then Sarah fell in love with a nice boy who worked on the railroad out of Onora Valley. They took an apartment and never ran around with her old friends and started going to church every Sunday. She got interested in the young peoples' work of the church and kids liked her and she had a fine Sunday-School class.

'Sarah always had a hankering to be a Girl Scout leader, so with the nucleus of a troop enlisted from her Sunday-School class, she formed a troop of eleven-, twelve-, thirteen-year-old girls. For a little while things went fine, then one by one the girls began dropping out. They'd say their mothers thought they had enough work at school without their taking on extra Scout work, and that music lessons in the afternoons interfered, and so on — in the most polite way telling her they didn't think Sarah was the kind of an example they wanted their adolescent daughters following. Sarah got the drift, all right, and after the troop stopped meeting she gave up her Sunday-School class, too.

'When her husband was transferred to a night run out of Onora Valley for several nights a week, Reg and the old gang started dropping by with a bottle and begging her to go out again. When she couldn't make them believe she wanted them to leave her alone and when the neighbors started gossiping, she sat down in the

kitchen of her apartment one day to read a book and as she read the book she reached over to the stove and turned on the gas and took great breaths of it until she had done away with herself.

'She left a note on the table saying that her old friends had kept her from leading the new life she had hoped for and the people whose respect she had tried to gain wouldn't believe her nor accept her even if she had succeeded in living it, so she was doing the only right thing she could in fairness to her husband, whom she so dearly loved.'

So Sarah is dead, and little Virginia Ashley and Psyche. Edna works in a lawyer's office in Onora Valley and Betty Dorn is married to a man up in Tennessee who never heard about her baby in Alabama. Young Lance lives with his mother's folks in North Carolina.

Craig married Margaret Bowers when she was seventeen. He made two hundred and eighty-five dollars a month at his job in the railroad shops, which is a good salary in any small town, and I never could see the Bowers' attitude that he wasn't good enough for her. Her father was rich, but he wasn't aristocratic rich, and he came home nights all covered with white from his bakery. He converted a business building into cash during the earlier days of the boom and sold his orange grove for a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to a development company that wanted the land for a subdivision. Old man Bowers had married a young waitress who served his meals at a boarding-house on Onora Avenue and who kept on calling him Mr. Bowers

even after they were married. It was probably the only romantic thing that ever happened in his life. In appreciation for the youth she had given him, he saved to the point of stinting to leave her cared for after his death. His daughter's elopement with Craig after he had forbidden her to have dates with him was his first keen disappointment, though he relented enough to buy them a house for a wedding present.

But when old Bowers was pretty sure that the rumors around town were true, about his wife riding off nights with another man while he was down at the bakery seeing to the morning's bread, he lost interest in everything and just sat on his front porch most of the time and rocked.

'He just sort of pined away after that, and late one night when Mrs. Bowers got out of a car and tiptoed up the steps, she found him slumped down in his chair on the porch, dead.

'Nobody could tell her a thing about her money, and before long it was gone, too. Not that I wanted any of it, though she always acted like she thought I was trying to get my hands on it when I'd tell her I knew investments somebody talked her into were no good.

'Then Margaret started acting up like her mother and it got so I couldn't do a thing with her. I gave her everything I could think of and took her out and made over her and all, but she acted so restless and dissatisfied all the time, or just sat at the piano and puckered down her nose tight in that way of hers and sort of stared out the window into space. I thought maybe the baby's coming would settle her. But she seemed to resent him.

'We had two friends who used to drop in all the time for a drink or bridge. Their baby was about the same age as ours and there seemed so much we were all interested in, and Margaret was so gay when they were around nights, that I used to be glad to see them. Well, that's where I made my mistake.

'Em'ry — that was the boy's name — was a spoiled son-of-a-bitch who could sell anything. His old man pampered him and sent him to one school right after he flunked out of another and when the boom came along, old Slick Tongue hit his stride. He had him a limousine and a chauffeur to drive him and he was supposed to be worth a million dollars on paper in commissions and investments. He liked to show off and he bought the biggest house in the subdivision he was selling and his wife and baby had everything you could think of — that is, until the boom broke. Like everybody else, his fortune was in worthless paper, and there wasn't anything else to sell because folks weren't buying anything.

'The only other business he knew anything about was the advertising background he had picked up from his father, who was the Florida representative for a national chain of advertisers.

'The *Onora Valley Weekly Advertiser* was Em'ry's idea. A puff-sheet sort of paper that came out on Monday mornings. It was distributed free at hotel desks, motion-picture houses and pool rooms throughout the county and it listed the best buys in most everything in the community for the week. A free feature story went with every ad in the paper and Robin wrote the woman's angle during whatever time she could spare from the



baby. Robin — that was Em'ry's wife. The novelty of the thing carried it a week or two and then it started petering out. At the end of the first month the staff had been fired and Robin and Em'ry were putting out the whole thing themselves and delivering it Mondays to the stands.

'But it was Robin who was selling the only ads that were sold; it was Robin who was writing the best copy, and it was her enthusiasm that was holding it together at all. Brent Bailey, who owned the Sports Palace where everybody bowled and shot pool, was in love with her and took the biggest space from her to help the paper along. He begged her every Saturday when she came for his ad to marry him and let him take care of her and the baby, but she said anybody could run out on a guy when he was having a streak of bad luck and she guessed she'd see it through. She did let him lend her enough money to pay the rent once, and she lied to Em'ry that she had won it in the slot-machine hitting the jack pot, because she knew he'd be sore about her taking it.

'Em'ry sulked and stayed away from the office whole days at a time and came home late nights and told her it was none of her business where he'd been and that since she was wearing the pants, the least she could do was stay out of his hair.

'It wasn't long before Robin knew where Em'ry had been spending the evenings. It was a girl out in the country from here who had been "understanding" him in his frustration and she was dying of peritonitis. The after-effects of a quack abortion. Em'ry had let her go

alone to a Negro midwife who scraped around inside her for twenty-five dollars, and the next night when the pains got so bad in her belly that she was all doubled up on the floor, he put her in his car and rode her up and down the streets until she fainted in the seat beside him. There was only one person he knew he could turn to, so he took the girl to Robin, crying and begging forgiveness. Robin put the dying girl in her own bed but she knew as soon as she saw her it was too late to do anything for her.

'There wasn't enough heart left in Robin after that to keep up the struggle to hold the paper together. Em'ry got on the W.P.A. until a local project was finished and they sort of hung on for the sake of the baby. A doctor gave her a job as his receptionist for a while, and in that slick way of his, Em'ry talked himself around her and everything seemed to be all right again. Then, he got the sensible idea that if they could get out of Onora and shake the dead weight of the boom and abortion off their tails there might be some place where they could make a fresh go of it.

'Brent Bailey begged her to stay on and marry him, but she said it must be that if you love somebody you love 'em, no matter what they do to you, and that was the way it was with her. And it was Brent who loaned Em'ry the money to go to Gainesville to see about the job that was open in the construction of a new building at the university there.

'I've often wondered what would have happened to that boy if things had broken just a little better for him than they did. You can usually tell a person by the

stock they come from, and his old man was a mighty hardy soul.

‘I hated his guts for what he did to me, yet he had a likable, disarming something about him that kept you from smashing his nose in for him when you should have. Down inside, he really liked fine things and he wanted a house for his family and he wanted to bask in the warmth of their pride in him as a father and a husband. Anyway, he figgered he had to get Robin out of Onora to keep her and when the job in Gainesville fell through he did a crazy, desperate thing. Like everything else he tried, it failed. He borrowed enough money from his brother-in-law in Decatur to rent an apartment in Jacksonville and to pay the first installment on furniture for it. Then he sent for Robin and the baby and told her he had landed a swell job traveling over the state for the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce. He prayed to God for a miracle to happen before the next rent day, and when it didn’t happen, he didn’t have the guts to face her. He high-tailed it to his mother’s house in Onora and left Robin to face eviction by herself.

‘She had been uptown shopping with the baby and when she came back to the apartment they wouldn’t let her in and a sheriff’s order wouldn’t let her take anything out. So she wrapped her coat around the baby and got on the bus and took him home to her family in Georgia. There wasn’t much to-do about the divorce, though Em’ry had the nerve to contest it.

‘The only good thing I can say about the bastard was that he didn’t drink. I might have been able to

have blamed it on that. Now that I look back on it I remember how Marg's face used to light up when he came by the house. He dropped in nights to talk and the way Marg used to listen seemed to inspire him and he'd talk on 'til I'd get so sleepy I'd have to go to bed and leave 'em sitting there. Marg was a good listener and I sure God miss not having her to talk to these nights, though I guess the things I had to say didn't interest her much.'

Craig had the whisky glass clutched so tightly in his hand that the knuckles stood out white under his skin.

'One night when I came home from the shops, she and the baby were gone. She'd taken their things and gone to live with Em'ry. He talked her into it. Said I didn't need her like he did. He could always talk slick and fast. She left me a note saying she'd gone. Just that: she'd gone. Well, I waited a couple of weeks, thinking maybe she'd see through him and come on back home where she belonged. All I wanted was my wife and my baby, and I'm a simple enough soul to have just made out like it never happened and to've gone on just like before.

'After a while when she didn't send any word of any kind, I went to see 'em. Not to do any shooting or anything that might frighten her away. Em'ry wasn't there at the time, the yellow bastard. He slipped away on another business trip to leave her to argue it out with me. Maybe she felt sorry for me, for she came home that night. But things weren't the same. When I'd try to make love to her she'd freeze up, kinda, and wouldn't let me touch her. I was pure dying for the

feel of her against me, but after a couple of tries I didn't have the heart for it again, and when I'd just try to talk to her I'd see her mind was away off somewhere else. It was like that for quite a spell.

'I could tell they'd been writing and I guess he got his nerve up again when he saw I wasn't going to shoot him or anything, and well, after two months, she went back to him to stay.

'I let her get the divorce from me because I didn't want her talked about any more than I could help and I pay her alimony to take care of the baby, though I know that son-of-a-bitch gets most of it. She's working now for the first time in her life, standing on her feet all day long back of a counter in a store to take care of him, and up in Georgia his other wife is standing on her feet all day long somewhere else to take care of his baby, and I get drunk like this every night I'm not working at the shops to forget about mine.'

Craig was too drunk to do much driving, and when I bundled him into my car to take him home he made no attempt to hide the fact that he was crying.

'Maybe some day,' he said to me, 'somebody will love me as much as I can love them.'

I put Craig off at his house and drove back along the lake shore by myself. The first streak of gray was riding the tops of the palms across the water at Enterprise. In another hour the bulkhead would be lined with Negroes shivering in the dawn, luring catfish onto the ends of their cane poles to go with hot grits and corn bread. I parked the car and walked down to the water's edge. The palmetto fronds were wet with spray and the

echo of the dying wind sang in the hollows of the band shell like the sighing in Craig's heart. A white launch bobbed in the waves with the rhythm of a child skipping rope, and up the lake at the freight dock a river steamer blew yellow rings of smoke into the morning. Behind me the skyline of Onora Valley lay low and slumberous in the whitening dawn and the red-eyed ghosts of a thousand prospectors rushed to buy lake-front lots before the rising of the sun.

'In God's name, Mr. Sammy, has you gone plum crazy? What in the world are you doin' down here this time of the morning starin' at the dark? Here, son, drink some of this hot coffee out of this pail.'

'Essie Mae! Oh, you crazy rascal, it's good to see you!'

Essie Mae was as fat and black as she used to be when she cooked for us before I went away to New York.

'I heard at Mr. Bradford's you was home. I told him I wanted to see you since you went to New Yawk and got big, but for God's sake, son, I didn't 'spec to find you here when I came to catch me my breakfast. You ain't sick, is you, son?'

'Yes, Essie Mae, I'm sick: I'm home sick; but I promise you I won't weep in the lake if you'll lend me one of those poles and bait the goddam thing for me and let me sit here with you and fish away — but say, how come you're fishing for breakfast?'

'Well, Mr. Sammy, since Mr. Alex died and young Mr. Alex went away to Fort Valley, I just rather slap at a catfish than cook for the trash that's left.'

Essie baited two hooks and we settled ourselves on

the bulkhead with the pail of coffee between us. She had cooked for Mr. Alex long before we moved to Onora Valley and we only had her in the summertime when Mr. Alex took his family to the mountains in North Carolina. Young Mr. Alex was my age.

Alex, senior, came to Onora Valley after the big freeze and with the advent of celery he founded the Onora Celery Paper Company. Celery paper is used in bleaching the stalks and is applied about ten or twelve days before a crop is cut for the market. The paper comes in ten-foot rolls that sell for an average of twelve dollars for a better-grade roll. Papering three to five acres at a time, the average farmer will run up an eleven-hundred-dollar bleaching bill.

From 1932 until 1940 the Onora Celery Paper Company did three-quarters of a million dollars' worth of business in the county, but each year, as the celery market sank lower and lower, collections grew worse and worse.

'Law', Mr. Sammy, after you lef' it was bad. Nobody had nothin'.'

The bottom year for celery was 1936 and Mr. Alex had sixty thousand dollars' worth of unpaid debts on his books.

Human nature is to splurge, and Mr. Alex had been no exception during the good years, especially where his boy was concerned. Young Alex went up North to school at Princeton and took week-end trips to New York to see the shows. He learned to ski at Lake Placid and hat-check girls in night clubs knew him well enough to take his hat without giving him a check. He studied

marine architecture at college and Mr. Alex bought a yacht and a speedboat to shoot them from the bulk-head to the mooring.

'When young Mister come home from the Nawth with his bride, Mr. Alex fo'close a house on the Avenue and give it to 'em for their present. Everybody mortgage their house to Mr. Alex for celery paper but he cain't pay taxes with houses. All they do is give 'im another headache and one day he woke up with the Gov'ment on his neck. Mr. Alex said he didn't know nothin' about no eight thousand dollars back taxes, that that was the bookkeeper's fault. Well, sir, they throw the bookkeeper in jail and tell Mr. Alex if he don't raise eight thousand dollars they goin' to throw him in there, too.

'I'm servin' breakfast just like you please one mornin' after that and I hear Mr. Alex shoutin' at the top of his voice and bangin' on the table. He say "No goddam bookkeepin' goin' to run my business, the business run the bookkeepin'." Then I hear him shout what was the bookkeeper bellyachin' about, that he was keeping his family from starvin' and it's a good thing it was him in jail instead of Mr. Alex, or both families would starve. He beat the table with his fist 'til his Georgia Banner ham plop out on the table, and as I'm comin' through the door with the grits he started turnin' purple in the face and tearin' at his collar and before we could get to 'im he keeled right over in the gravy, dead. Yes, sir.

'Well, just seem like young Mr. Alex didn't know nothin' at all about handlin' the farmers who might've



paid a little. He talk down at 'em with his white collar and they don't like that. Mis' Lissa, she like the dog track at Longwood and to flounce around on the dance floor at the Flamingo, and Mr. Alex he don't raise no part of that eight thousand dollars. Well, sir, the Gov'ment done took it, and put all the fine machin'ry on the block and sold it, sold all of it, an' Mr. Alex's long old paper knives with it. Mr. Alex loved them knives. I've seen him sort of lean down with his cheek by the blade and run the ball o' his thumb 'long the shine and he'd say, "Essie Mae, that's a sharp son-of-a-bitch."

'Well, there it was, a bust, an' old Missus settin' on the side porch rockin' and cryin' quiet like in her han'kerchief. The boathouse took the little boat for rent. Mr. Alex had a diamond ring he used to wear on his little finger and he'd flash it in the light befo'e he'd sign the papers. That helped pay some pressin' debts.

'Old Missus's prissy sister come down from Raleigh to run things and befo'e you know it, child, they done turn the house, the big house, into a tourist, an' charge a dollar a night to anybody to sleep in it. Well, you know if Mr. Alex was alive he'd bang the table over that goin' on. Strange Yankees sleepin' on his Beautyrest and dryin' their wet be-hinds on his 'nitialed tow'ls. Miss prissy-sis and I didn't get along — I wa'nt cautious with the butter; I wa'nt cordial to the guests; I wa'nt this and I wa'nt that, an' as I'm too mannered to back-talk 'er I says to myself I better quit, and here I am, child, fishin' fo' my breakfast.

'When all the dé-bree cleared away, all Mr. Alex had

to his name was his wife and that dam' old big yacht. One day before I left I heard him bounce up the steps and shout, "Lissa, we goin' to make us a gesture." He was wavin' a handful of foldin' money in front of her eyes. "Pack, child," he says to 'er; "I've mortgaged the yacht." An' what do you think that boy done? Pay bills? No siree. They took the last bit of money they had to their names and took 'em a cruise and when the money was gone they drove the big ol' yacht right up to the bank and said to the man, "Take 'er, she's yours. I'm goin' to Fo't Valley and sell me some peach crates." An' he and Miss Lissa got in the car and rode away and lef' the man standin' there holdin' the boat.'

'From the looks of our bucket, Essie Mae, the catfish must have gone on up to Fort Valley with them. Let me see, I'd say I used about five dollars' worth of worms.'

I pressed the bill into her hand and got into the car and drove on toward home. When I turned off the lake front into the Avenue I looked back and saw her standing there waving at me in the sunrise.

These were my friends who stayed on in Onora Valley after me — not those who realized soon enough that it is not the place where young people may give all the good there is in them.

# eight

## *The Farmer in the Dell*

**O**NORA VALLEY is a one-commodity town. It has been a one-commodity town twice.

The St. John's River winds its way northward from the saw-grass lakes down around Melbourne on the east coast of Florida to Jacksonville and the sea. Halfway along its course the dark, mysterious river widens to become Lake Monroe, and along the southern shore of the lake lies Onora Valley and the farming community that up until 1940 was the celery center of the country.

Onora is the head of navigation on the St. John's, and freight boats ply up and down the river every day to Jacksonville. It is on the main lines of the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line Railroad and loading tracks are located every half-mile through the farming district to speed away the refrigerated cars of fragrant, crisp celery from the Valley and Oviedo and Chuluota to the Northern markets.

The Hill Lumber Company is the oldest established business in Onora Valley. Mr. Hill was the first honest-to-goodness citizen of the town. He came down the river on a pleasure boat from Jacksonville in 1873, and when

he felt the warm sun beating down on the back of his neck and saw the trees hanging heavy with tropical fruit and fish leaping in the river, he decided to stay.

He slept on the ground until he was able to salvage a sugar barrel floating up the river. He knocked out the head of it and slept in it, and he ate the plentiful quail that he caught in a net. The river boat captain brought him a piano box on one of his trips and Mr. Hill added a wing to his barrel.

One day Mr. Hill accidentally killed a pig and had to skip town until the trouble blew over. He lived for six months among the Seminole Indians and came home with tales of having killed hundreds of alligators and plumed birds down on the Kissimmee River.

The first railroad to Onora Valley was run from Orlando, the county seat of Orange, in 1880. General Grant, who was President of the United States at that time, took time off from a pleasure trip down the St. John's to dig the first shovelful of dirt for the South Florida Railroad. Mr. Hill owned the shovel which General Grant used to turn the earth, and after the ceremony was over he sold the dirt the President had dug and charged a quarter apiece for the cigar stubs he had thrown away, though he frankly admitted that he was not sure that all the butts he sold were actually smoked by General Grant.

At the time of the laying of the railroad, Onora Valley was a thriving little town of thirty-odd buildings, all clustered around the waterfront. Two general stores dealt in drygoods, groceries and necessities. Two saloons, a drugstore, a hotel and the combination wharf

and packing house made up the business district. The residential section, as a precaution against malaria, was above town along Magnolia Avenue and away from the water.

The hotel, the Valley House, was the finest American-plan hotel south of Jacksonville. It featured a magnificent river view from its rambling verandas and strolls through palm-shaded parks at the water's edge of Lake Monroe. There was a lawn tennis court on the grounds, and the bowling alley was an attraction to the ladies as well as the gentlemen guests.

Twenty years after Mr. Hill had set up housekeeping in his barrel, the contented valley had settled down to the single industry of planting citrus trees and waiting for them to grow into golden dollars. Orange groves dotted the shores of Lake Jessup and Silver Lake, and along the lake shore a citrus paradise stretched as far as the eye could see.

In 1895, Onora County, with an income of fifty-five dollars per capita for every man, woman and child, white or black, was the richest agricultural section in America.

But Onora Valley's prosperity depended on one crop: oranges — and one morning in February of that year the people of the Valley, and of all Florida, awoke to find their orange trees frozen down to the ground. The 'great freeze' cost the state of Florida a hundred million dollars and the citizens of Onora found themselves stripped of the source of their income, and destitute.

The weak-hearted took a look at the sea of blackened tree stumps and packed their things and moved away.

In desperation, those who stayed on turned to the soil and the quicker-growing vegetables as a means of survival. Some turned to the river, and the fish they didn't use for their own food they shipped to Jacksonville, and the little money they earned that way bought their clothes and medicines and supplies.

But in 1895 there was no way of irrigating the old orange-grove lands and the unirrigated soil was unsuited for growing truck crops. Most of the land was sold for taxes and four years after the freeze the asking price was twenty-five cents an acre.

The summer after the 'great freeze,' as it has come to be known, Mr. J. N. Whitner, looking about for a way in which he might recoup his citrus losses, brought celery plants from Michigan and planted them in Onora Valley on his reclaimed grove lands. His celery was ready for use that Thanksgiving, and he was so encouraged by the success of his first yield that he persuaded some of his friends to try the new crop. But it wasn't until the spring of '98 that they began to ship it. That year four refrigerator cars were shipped to the New York market and there was a demand for it in Philadelphia and Cincinnati. In spite of the 'great freeze' the population of the town had jumped to thirty-five hundred.

Artesian water was first discovered in the section by a farmer who was trying to sink a pump on his farm. One day when he returned to his work in the fields after his noonday dinner he found his ground overflowing with spring water that smelled strongly of sulphur. People began using these natural wells to water their groves and their gardens.

The Methodist preacher had laid some inverted wooden troughs underground to drain off surplus water from his well after rains. He noticed that no matter how dry the fields were, the vegetation growing above his home-made drainage system was always lush and green. His observation of this system and his application of it with wooden pipes throughout his farm led to the present-day Onora Valley sub-irrigation system. Developed intelligently and with the use of sections of three-inch tile placed in rows twenty-five feet apart through the farms, the Valley had the answer to its irrigation and drainage problem and the price of the old citrus land jumped to a hundred and fifty dollars an acre.

Onora Valley had found its answer to the 'great freeze': artesian water — cheap irrigation — perfect drainage — excellent climate conditions.

'Control your water supply and ensure maximum yield.'

'The Man Who Owns an Onora Valley Celery Farm Owns the Earth.'

In the season of 1907 farmers in the Valley shipped 158,000 crates of celery. From 1905 to 1908 a farmer named C. F. Williams made \$30,000 off five acres of celery land. Mrs. B. E. Tackach received \$10,000 in 1908 from six acres of celery land. Mr. J. E. Pace, farming on shares, split \$9000. A farmer named McDonald said: 'I began growing celery here nine years ago with \$500. I paid a hundred dollars down on my land and used the balance for working expenses. I would not sell my place for less than \$30,000, nor a single improved acre of it for less than \$1000. Some of my neighbors

have made larger crops than I, but I never did better than \$1700 on an acre of celery.'

Onora Valley was the Celery Delta, and in 1909 in an address before the citizens of the town, Mr. J. N. Whitner, remembering the 'great freeze,' said:

'My friends, since February 8, 1895, I have made up my mind never to depend on one crop, no matter how promising that crop may be. Let us act the part of wisdom and learn the lesson of the hour. Never let us again put all our eggs in one basket.'

Driving down to Florida on my recent visit, I stopped for the night at a hotel in Palatka. I recognized the clerk back of the desk as a man I used to know in Onora Valley and I drew him into conversation about the town. He sounded pessimistic.

'Onora Valley is deadlocked by its greatest asset: celery farmin',' he said as he leaned over the desk. 'Industry would like to come to Onora because it's got water and rail and highway transportation, but all the land is owned by small-farm growers who raise celery on every available inch of it. In the good years the farmers spent their money on expensive automobiles for their families to ride around in and wouldn't save enough to tide them over the lean months between plantin' and sellin'. There is no summer crop and durin' the off months they sit around the corner drugstore. They speculate in early and late crops and never play safe.

'When a small farmer wants a production loan from one of the big grower organizations or fertilizer com-



panies, why, naturally, the only thing he can put up for security is his farm. Consequently, after several bad years the backer will end up ownin' the farm. Well, that's what's happened in Onora Valley, and most of the farmers you'd remember along Celery Avenue have either moved back to the Carolinas or the Midwest where they came from, or are on W.P.A. Onora Valley has got to get out of the farmin' business before it can come back.'

I was in Onora County when I pulled into a filling station for gasoline. The man who ran the station had been the most successful independent fertilizer dealer in the county when I left for New York.

'Well, son, guess you're right surprised to see me running a fillin' station, ain't you? If I could get what's owed me on my books,' he explained, 'I could buy me a yacht and cruise for two years in the South Seas. I can add up a hundred thousand dollars owed me on my machine. When you farm, you do or you don't, and seems like all the people I let have fertilizer on credit didn't.'

A little way down the road I passed a farmhouse I remembered. I slowed up enough to read the sign nailed to a palmetto tree in the yard.

THIS FARM  
FOR SALE

LONG TERMS — LOW INTEREST

THE FEDERAL LAND BANK  
COLUMBIA, S.C.

Roger Green is the man I envy most in Onora Valley

He has built the *Herald* into a successful small-town newspaper in which he writes what he thinks about whatever he wants to think about. His editorials are picked up on the exchange desks of newspapers throughout the country, and each year he receives a bid from some larger paper to join its editorial staff.

'I'm the director of my own policy,' Roger said to me. 'I write what I think. I live comfortably. I have time for my family, for my garden, and my boy will soon be old enough to ride and hunt with me. Why should I leave the *Herald* and work and save to buy something I've already got?'

Roger's house is in Indian Mound Village, the location of an old Seminole Indian burying ground. To get there you ride several miles along Celery Avenue until you reach the St. John's. At the bridge, you follow a winding road along the water and Seven Oaks sits in a cluster of trees at the river edge, with miles of Lake Monroe and palmetto-studded prairie for a front yard.

Late one afternoon, after Roger had put the *Herald* to bed, we sat on his front porch drinking home-made orange wine, watching the floating islands of water hyacinth drift by and listening to the bouncing of occasional cars riding over the aged wooden bridge down the river.

Riding out to Roger's house that afternoon I had spotted only one farmhouse along Celery Avenue that looked as if it had been painted in the last few years. There was the same fragrant smell of celery in the fields, but the farmhouse yards were overgrown with weeds, roof corners leaned, porch steps looked run down, and

the shiny brightness of Celery Avenue I remembered was gone. Land bank 'For Sale' signs were common.

'Roger,' I asked, 'what happened to Celery Avenue?'

'The people forget the lesson of '95. Ten years after the big freeze farmers were doin' the very same thing the oldsters swore would never happen again — growin' one crop. Instead of oranges it had become celery. Celery everywhere, and all the good land along the Avenue was sellin' for as high as one to two thousand dollars an acre. 'Course, there was some lettuce, some escarole, and some people even tried growin' cotton for a while, but the big money crop was celery.

'A series of tragedies befell the town. The failure of Simon Rivers' bank was the first. Then the backwash of the real estate boom carried the National Bank along with it. The Wall Street crash in New York hurt some here, as it did everywhere else in the country. The Mediterranean fruit fly plague and the overzealousness of the clean-up squads and sprayers eradicatin' it knocked the props out from under most of the citrus-growers in this section.

'However, in spite of all these general financial setbacks, 1929, '30 and '31 were good celery years and in 1932 most farmers along Celery Avenue were debt-free. A farmer can pull out of one bad year, and maybe two, and sometimes three, but now, after eight rotten market years, there aren't a dozen farmers in the county that haven't got from one to three mortgages on their places. The land banks and the finance companies own most of the fine farms. I guess they had to take them over after stakin' the owners with fertilizer and production money

until consistently bad years got them so deep in the hole they couldn't hope to get out. In any kind of trouble the first thing a fellow thinks of is savin' his face, so when the finance companies offered them a salary to stay on and manage their old farms, some of them stayed. Though I don't imagine the salary is much.

'One fellow who lost his place,' Roger went on, 'told me the other day that if he could have made just one dollar profit on every crate of celery he sold he could have paid off liens, production loans, fertilizer and all other bills and still had a balance in the bank. But, he told me, by the time the commission men got theirs, and the iceman, and the crate man, and the shipper, all he got was a swift kick in the rear. There hasn't been enough profit for the average farmer to live within, even if he was a mind to.

'To ride along the Avenue makes you sick at heart. The Wades have lost their place. Fred Gainor sells tickets for the Cuban lottery to get enough for his family to eat. The Lawrences have moved back to Carolina and old Jim Lindsay's widow takes in tourists. So on down the line. And now, if suddenly we were blessed with a rousin' market, it would be too late, because the celery center has moved — a hundred and fifty miles down the road to the Everglades. The little farmer is through. The man behind the plow is as obsolete as the bicycle built for two. Farmin' has become a business, a big business. Onora Valley, with its twenty-acre farms costin' two thousand dollars an acre, and three hundred dollars to get ready to produce, can't compete with the hundred-acre farms along the rim of

Lake Okeechobee costin' eighty dollars an acre which you can prepare with mole-drainage for a dollar and a half an acre.

'The ground down there is rich and black and you bounce on it when you walk, it's so alive. There's a new frontier of a million acres in the 'Glades, and rich big-production farmers from the North are pushin' it through to the sea. Down around Clewiston and Belle Glade, land which needs no fertilizer because of its natural chemical content can be cleared for plowin' at a cost of ten dollars an acre. The cold winds whippin' down from the north are lulled by the warm waters of the lake as they blow over it and the last bite is out of them by the time they reach the celery fields. Mechanical farmin', with its great machines for clearing and planting and harvesting, together with the low cost of production, have put the sharecropper and the small-acreage farmer out of business. The soil down there is naturally perfect for growing anything in the seed catalogue, and the farmer who can't afford to buy his land right off can lease as much as he needs from the thousand-acre-block Northern promoters for as little as twelve or fifteen dollars an acre. It only makes sense that the man who wants to farm is goin' where he can raise the most for the least, and Onora Valley isn't that place any more.

'They've got a motto down there in the 'Glades — "Show us the market and we'll break it." Naturally, we can't compete with thousand-acre, low-price volume here on Celery Avenue. The finest celery in the world wouldn't bring a good price if there was so much of it

you couldn't give it away, and that's what's happenin'. The thing that has benefited the consumin' public the most is the very thing that has licked Onora Valley's celery farmers.

'In progress, somebody always suffers — it's too bad in this case it happens to be our homefolks. There used to be a sayin' around here, "You take care of twenty acres and twenty acres will take care of you." But not any more. Now it's fifty, sixty, seventy acres a man's got to take care of if he wants to get anywhere.'

I left Roger's house about sunset and drove on back to town. When I got near John Donley's place I saw him get out of a car in the driveway and start towards the house. I pulled up by the mailbox and hailed him.

John and I were classmates in high school and he had already started farming in his senior year. We leaned against the yard fence and talked 'til supper time. John summed up Roger's editorial observations in the concrete terms of an actual participant. While he talked he rested his elbows on the gatepost and looked out over his celery field.

'We Donleys, three of us, farm together. We ain't had but one decent celery year since '32, and that was on account of the freeze of '40 which made a short crop boost the market price. We Donleys had a good crop that year and we made money. But the year before we lost fifteen thousand and after payin' that off, we were just about where we started.

'I lay the blame on the new farmin' land opened up in the Everglades. We cain't hope to compete with the low cost of ready land down there, nor with their

volume yield. This farm of mine here is nineteen and a half acres. I bought it back in '28, "on time." And now, after rakin' and scrapin' all these years to meet my payments, it ain't worth the balance I owe on it.

'It looks to me like the day of the little farmer is through. We twenty-acre boys cain't hope to compete with the big companies who have five thousand acres to rent and finance. Eighty per cent of the farms here on Celery Avenue have production-loan mortgages on 'em. The shippers and finance companies own this county and I want to tell you, they are stuck with it.

'God knows what's to become of Celery Avenue. I'm sure I don't. But, this is my life and I guess I'll keep on plantin' celery just like my daddy has and like my boy will probably do after me.'

# nine

## *Meet the Mayor*

**L**ONG before my family moved to Onora Valley in the heart of the Florida celery kingdom, I knew that some day I was going to be an actor. High-school dramatics were an obvious prelude to professional life and I missed none of the obvious opportunities — including the chance to speak over the local radio station.

The first microphone I ever saw was set in front of me in 1925 on an occasion such as a would-be actor might dream about; it was the conclusion of the Onora Valley High School oratorical contest, and I was the winner of the gold medal awarded each commencement by the Junior Order of United American Mechanics — and the microphone was to carry my rendition of ‘Sparticus to the Gladiators’ to the far corners of the world. At least, that’s what it seemed to me; I doubt if they actually traveled much farther than the nearer edges of Onora County, for the local station was a very small, very low-powered and very poorly engineered affair.

But, anyway, there was a microphone, and I was the speaker. And I was introduced by the Mayor of Onora Valley. Mayor Simon Rivers.



This is the story of Mayor Simon Rivers, the man who first launched me on the air waves (a very great event in my early life), and he was, in his own estimation, in the estimation of his fellow citizens, in my estimation and (as will later be developed) in the estimation of the Chase National Bank, a very great man.

Mayor Simon Rivers is dead now, dead and gone to his reward, such as it may be.

Between 1925 and 1933 — the last time I saw him — a scant eight years had intervened. But the measure of what had happened to Mayor Simon Rivers is contained in the fact that my first radio announcer was, in 1933, pawing over the garbage can back of Wilkinson's Élite Restaurant for his breakfast. I am eternally glad that he didn't see me; it would have been a sad thing for both of us, for while Ex-Mayor Simon Rivers by that time was dead to the side glances of his fellow townsmen, he might have had a hard time adjusting himself to the greeting of a home-town boy who had not been dulled to his fate by long familiarity.

So I turned my head quickly aside and hurried past the alley. Later, from friends around town, I gathered a résumé of Mayor Rivers' downfall, but the details came to me only after persistent grubbing on my most recent visit to Onora Valley. I don't think the story has ever been told at length anywhere, and I tell it here because it seems to me to sum up, in one neat package, the essence of small-town politics gone to seed. I think, even, that the story is peculiarly Southern in its flavor, for I cannot conceive of a Yankee carrying off such misdeeds with the flair and élan that Mayor Simon Rivers demonstrated so abundantly.

The story I got from a dozen sources, but mostly from one who took an inglorious part in it — Ned Cartwright. Ned drank endless Coca-Colas, the teetotaler's tippie, one afternoon and for my education and enlightenment told me all he knew about Mayor Rivers and his municipal chicanery.

'Most folks,' Ned began, 'say Onora Valley was a victim of Simon Rivers and Simon Rivers was a victim of the times. Any dam' how, he was a finagler and a politician from 'way back yonder. He came to town when he was twenty-two, and right off, he got himself elected mayor. He made such an energetic mayor that he was sent up to the legislature, and it was Simon Rivers who wrote the bill makin' Onora out of this part of old Orange County. Well, that set him solid for a while. Then, in 1913, he started the Onora Valley Bank and Trust Company and in a few years' time he got to be a small-town dictator, if ever you saw one. He ran this town, and most people seemed satisfied to sit back and let him. They were too busy farmin' celery, and Rivers was always easy with loans whenever anybody needed any money to tide them over a bad crop. Everybody in these parts kinda looked on Simon as a god.

'Then, one day, right out of a clear sky, Roger Green, who edits the *Herald*, come out in his paper accusin' Simon of buyin' votes with unsecured loans. Well, you could have heard the holler all along Celery Avenue. 'Course, the ones that protested loudest were the ones who owed the bank the most money. At that time, Simon had just come back from New York and announced he had managed to sell a big block of municipal

bonds at par, and ran a story in the *Herald* about how the price he got for the bonds showed what the financial world thought about the condition and prospects of the town.

'Well, by golly, the very next day Roger Green had a little story down in the corner of the front page of the *Herald* sayin' that none of the bonds sold at par but that the entire issue sold at .9510 bearin' five and a half per cent interest. Well, hell, if that was true, Simon had lied to the people about forty thousand dollars' worth.

'The fireworks started when Roger ran a tiny line on his editorial page sayin' an optimist is a man who sells bonds at ninety-five ten and calls it par. People got curious with all the talk goin' around and started writin' in askin' what *did* the bonds sell for and Simon got so mad he declared he'd break Roger Green if it was the last thing he ever did. Well, that's where he made his mistake.

'The mayor took forty thousand dollars of the bank's money, as it turned out later, and started an opposition newspaper to put the *Herald* out of business. He had all the help he needed to make trouble for Roger, on account of dam' near everybody in town owed Simon's bank money and they were afraid he'd start callin' in their notes if they took sides with the *Herald*. Strikes went on in the newspaper plant and advertisin' fell 'way off in the paper, but somehow or 'nother Roger always got the paper out on time.

'Now, Simon Rivers got his power because the affairs of the town were run by a three-man commission, and as mayor, Simon was one of them, with a vote. As a check

on Simon, the *Herald* used all its strength to get a man elected that Roger thought the town could trust. But he no sooner got elected than Simon loaned him a lot of money unsecured. Then, whenever Simon wanted something passed, all he had to do to get the necessary majority vote was to give the new man a kick under the table and it was in. And, hell, if I had owed Simon Rivers as much money as they say *he* did, I just might have done the same thing.

‘All of this was in the summer of 1927. And all through the summer the *Herald* kept demanding a statement of the town’s financial condition from Simon, since he was mayor, and all the town’s money was deposited in his bank. The third member of the commission was the most influential citrus and produce broker in the section and he was too busy to take any active part in the town’s affairs. Sort of a prestige commissioner. Later on, when Roger made things so hot for the commission that Mr. Prestige got worried, he had his own auditors come in and check the town books, but it was too late to do anything about it, because every one of Roger’s accusations was true, though it took him a long time to make the people in the town see it. We were all as blind as bats and me just as bad as the rest. In the meantime, Simon and his stooge kept on votin’ money for a hospital, and for a public swimmin’ pool, and for fire-alarm boxes and other improvements and gettin’ the money and puttin’ it in the bank — but no improvements.

‘Then Roger got mad. He got mad with the people for bein’ too lazy to look around them and see what was

goin' on in their own town — and he started askin' questions in his paper. Big, bold type so the citizens who couldn't read could dern near spell out the questions, they were so plain. He wanted to know why the people couldn't find out what the total indebtedness of the town was? What become of the half-million dollars Simon raised by the sale of the bonds in New York? Why had the commission voted bonds twice for layin' sewers in nigra-town and there weren't any sewers? Hell, that was a *good* question. Point-blank, Roger asked the mayor to explain to *him*, if the rest of the town wasn't interested enough to make it their business, why the town's financial crisis was due to the failure of the people to pay their taxes when the tax records showed that seventy per cent or more of the town taxes had already been paid.

'The commissioners were also the bond trustees, and Roger asked 'em to explain why it was necessary to sell bonds at ninety-five ten in direct violation of the charter when no immediate improvements were planned and everybody was already complainin' about high taxes?

'He was throwin' out all these questions tryin' to make the editor of the *Times*, Simon's paper, stick his neck out. But the *Times* man was a genius at usin' words and sayin' nothin'. He just flowered all over the page.

'Now, the cashier of Simon's bank also acted as the secretary to the trustees and one day Roger, in that slow, deliberate way of his, walked into the bank and up to the cashier and told him that since he'd found out all the town's financial records weren't kept in the clerk's

office, he'd kinder like a statement of what become of the swimmin' pool money, and the hospital money — and just what did the commissioners expect to do with the million dollars' worth of bonds in their possession? He said he figgered his readers would like to know.

'For five days runnin', every ten o'clock, every two o'clock, the cashier promised Roger a financial statement. Then one two o'clock he just said damit, he was too busy. So Roger, then he *knew* there was plenty wrong.

'Simon's motto was "Shoot the Works" and Roger's campaign up to then hadn't slowed him down a bit. Sunday mornings he held forth in his "Scrap Iron Sunday-School Class" of men he invited in off the streets into the movie theatre. He sat at his desk in the bank on weekdays with a cigar droopin' from the corner of his mouth and singin' the main line of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." His answer to questions political would be in the form of an immediate loan to the enquirer — a pretty dern good reply. Between loans, he dictated editorials on "confidence" to be run in the *Times*.

'Roger demanded a showdown. He studied over the city charter to see how best to go about it. By this time he had got enough friends downwind of Simon, who got a whiff of the actual smell of things, and in a mass meetin' they demanded the mayor call a special election to change the charter and increase the commission from three members to five. A motion to that effect passed unanimously at the meeting and Simon set August 5 as the date of the election. Son, that was some meeting.

It was held down on the lake front and political fur flew all over the band shell.

'Roger out and out accused Simon of mismanagement, misappropriation of town funds, of puttin' the people's money in his bank when it should have been used for the voted improvements and then lendin' their own money back to 'em at interest — in fact, all the fancy names for crooked politics. He accused Simon of passin' half a million dollar pavin' bonds an' givin' the bids for the work to a company he formed and controlled. Roger said Simon'd pave a hundred thousand dollars' worth and put four hundred thousand back in his bank. Anyway, the asphalt all over town was beginnin' to blister in the sun and crack up.

'The *Herald's* motto in the campaign to increase the number of town commissioners was "Two heads are better than one and five are better than three." Simon said he was givin' the people what they wanted and Roger said they'd let the people decide on Election Day. But all Simon had to do to forecast the vote was to thumb through his little pile of promissory notes in the safe.

'Simon won — 507 to 484. And, boy, it was a night for the Rivers boys! The votes were all counted about midnight. Several hundred of Simon's supporters were millin' around in front of the pollin' booths. When the result was read to the crowd, everybody went crazy. I owed Simon a little money, myself, and I kinder went crazy, too. A lot of us were drunk. I used to drink a little, then. We marched around downtown with light-wood torches a while and then somebody in the crowd

shouted, "Let's get that bastard that started all this," and we set out towards Roger's house singin' "Hang Roger Green's body to a sour-orange tree."

'The news of the election swept over the town like lightnin' and Roger must have had a pretty good idea of what was comin', for when we got to his house he was standin' on his porch with a shotgun in his hands. "I'll blow the hell out of the first one of you who sets his foot on this porch," he said, and the crowd yelled and hol-lered and cat-called, but that was all. I dam' well didn't get near him, 'cause I knew Roger well enough to know he'd shoot.

'Then somebody remembered the newspaper office and by that time most everybody was drunk enough to want to tear it up. We scrambled for brickbats and made a bee-line for the *Herald*. We chunked bricks through the windows and I guess we would have smashed the printin' machinery but the foreman and a couple of Roger's faithfuls were standin' guard over it with pistols. Anyhow, we hung crêpe all over the doors and windows of the building and dug a grave out in front of it before we finally went home.

'Well, sir, we hung the crêpe on the wrong door. Next day, nice as you please, there was a story on the front page of the *Herald* congratulatin' the commissioners on their vote of confidence and forgivin' the crêpe-hangin' on the grounds of election excitement. And right down under it, yes, sir, there was a little notice that the Onora Valley Bank and Trust Company had failed to open its doors for business that morning. To win the election Simon had loaned out all the money in the bank.



'Three days after the election Simon resigned as mayor of the town. A month later the state bank examiner's report was published and Simon was arrested and brought to trial charged with all the things Roger accused him of. Simon's cashier, who had been too busy to furnish Roger with a financial statement, was charged with makin' excessive loans to himself and with falsely appropriatin' as pretty a little sum as ever you saw. All the gov'ment bonds had disappeared from people's safe-deposit boxes. Simon said the cashier had kept the keys. The cashier said Simon made him give 'em to him so he could sell 'em and put the money in the bank.

'The facts that came out at the trial made some of us look pretty seedy. 'Specially the crêpe-hangin' brigade. And they made Roger look pretty big. Simon had gone whole hog. He had loaned himself over three hundred thousand dollars and had misappropriated half a million more. His loans amounted to more than his total deposits and most of the money had been lent to friends he knew had no way to repay it. He let a teller in the bank have enough money for a trip to Hawaii. He let anybody have money. Then when the lendin' money was low he'd pass an improvement bond issue and put the money from that into the bank. The hospital money prob'ly went to pay Simon's construction company for pavin' boom-time subdivision streets. That's just one of the mysteries. And the town itself had on deposit a million dollars unsecured.

'When Simon made his famous bond-sellin' trip to New York his lendin' money must have been pretty low,

because he pulled the slickest trick I've ever heard tell of, or you are likely to. He took a million dollars' worth of no-'count paper in his bank and another million dollars' worth of unauthorized Onora Valley securities and posted the package with the Chase National Bank of New York as collateral for nine hundred thousand dollars in sweet cash. When the bank closed, its assets were less than seven thousand dollars and it owed a god-durned cool million.

'Well, there they were, on trial — the big dog, and the little biddy dog, and everybody wondering how Simon was goin' to get 'em out of *that* one. Simon put up a front and pleaded not guilty to all charges. But he was sunk from the moment the cashier got up in the court and said that he wanted to plead guilty because he wanted the people of Onora Valley to know the truth about what he did do and what he didn't do. He said he covered up to protect his employer and his friend and he knew he was wrong and he wanted to get it off his conscience. He blamed his gettin' over his head in debt on the real estate boom. "I did wrong," he said. "I know it. Now I've admitted I did wrong. Let the law do with me what it has to."

'All the time the cashier was confessin' Simon just sat there chewin' his cigar and blinkin' his eyes, but that was one time he wa'n't singin' "Let Me Call You Sweet-heart."

'When all the lawin' had run its course, Simon ended up drawin' fourteen years in the state penitentiary. On account of his clean breast of things, everybody, includin' Roger, went to bat for the cashier, and he got

off with a light three years. I was in the courtroom when the sentences were passed. Nobody said much. There wasn't much to say, and when all the sentencin' was over and the sheriff was takin' 'em out through the door, I thought to myself, "Well, there they go, and the last little bit of the great big old Florida boom with 'em."

'It was a personal victory for Roger, but you know Roger, he wouldn't gloat much. He jus' decided in that quiet way of his to clean up the loose ends of Simon's régime before the iron cooled off. He had sense enough to know it wouldn't be many months before people would be sayin' how sorry they were for poor ol' Simon Rivers, sittin' over there in the state penitentiary. So he busted loose first on the city attorney, accusin' him of knowin' gen'rally what had been goin' on an' not doin' anythin' to stop it. Roger sorter suggested in his paper that since the city attorney durin' the Rivers clambake was also the bank's attorney, the decent thing for him to do would be to resign. Roger figgered that a city attorney who had let his town drop a million dollars in a bank whose president, another client, was off to serve fourteen years for havin' taken it, should bow out of the town budget without havin' to be told.

'But Mr. City Attorney, he thought different, and the upshot of the thing was a libel suit against the *Herald* for a hundred thousand dollars. That was in 1928, and libel suit or no libel suit, the attorney was out of his city job at the next election.

'The lawsuit came to trial in the summer of '29. There, sir, was a trial. Each side had a lawyer who was

a candidate for governor of the state of Florida and they stretched the oratory out for twenty-one days. The trial was full of all kinds of excitement, like Roger's brother droppin' his pistol on the courtroom floor and bein' tossed out of the place.

'While the judge was gettin' ready to instruct the jury, the city attorney's lawyers went into a huddle, and when they come out of it they had reduced the amount of damages asked from one hundred thousand dollars to one cent. And be dam' if'n the dern jury didn't argue for thirty-six hours tryin' to decide whether to give the lawyer one cent or nothin'. They never *did* agree, and they haven't 'til this day.

'People got about one-half of one per cent back on the money they had in Simon's bank. He stayed over at the penitentiary awhile and he got so feeble they let him out. He died here in 1938 of what they call old-age complications, but I expect the truth of the matter is the old boy jus' plain out starved to death.

'Simon Rivers took the heart, the optimism, out of Onora Valley. Yes, sir, this was a one-man town, and he dang near sucked the public tit dry.'

# ten

## *Miss Sophia, Social Worker Extraordinary*

MISS SOPHIA is going to heaven — if for no other reason, for the way she saw to it that Mrs. Jennifer Jones died warm.

Miss Sophia is a field worker for the State Welfare Board, and she rides the back roads in her automobile administering Old Age Assistance, Aid to the Blind and Aid to Dependent Children grants to the underprivileged families of Onora County.

Mrs. Jennifer Jones lived alone in a little house near the edge of town. She was well over sixty-five and received the maximum Old Age Assistance of thirty-five dollars a month. This was enough to keep Mrs. Jennifer in food and clothing and medicine, but winter was coming and Mrs. Jennifer needed a stove. No matter which way Miss Sophia juggled Mrs. Jennifer's budget, she couldn't make a new stove fit into it. Then one day she spied a red-and-green bed coverlet that Mrs. Jennifer kept in the top bureau drawer. Quick as a flash, she remembered a friend in a near-by town who collected antiques. Miss Sophia's pencil figured that a new stove

would cost twenty-four dollars and a supply of wood for it nine more. When she asked Mrs. Jennifer if she would sell the coverlet for thirty-five dollars the old lady nearly fainted at the prospect.

A telephone call to the antique enthusiast resulted in the immediate sale of the coverlet. For thirty-five dollars the collector had an exquisite antique and Mrs. Jennifer had her stove. It is true that Mrs. Jennifer died before the winter was out, but she died warm, and Miss Sophia felt better about that.

That's the kind of a woman Miss Sophia is — a home missionary, really, with an understanding heart.

One morning while I was home Miss Sophia came by the house and took me on her round of calls for the day.

We headed first for Negro-town. She stopped the car to speak to an old colored man who was leading a yelling baby boy by the hand. Great, round tears glistened on the child's cheeks.

'What's ailin' Doogie, Uncle Rafe?'

'Mawnin', Mis' Sophie. I cain't do a thang wid him, Mis' Sophie. I done bought him a slap of wax an' now he wants a horn of cream. I say to him "Doogie, I ain't made out of re-lief checks." But Doogie too l'il to listen to enything but his belly.'

'Well, here, get him an ice-cream cone with this nickel. It won't hurt him none an' I guess I can spare it. Uncle Rafe, I'm lookin' for Aunt Mame Troublefield.'

'That's ol' her,' Rafe pointed, 'sittin' yonder on Mis' Lossie's front porch.'

'Look at her sittin' there,' Miss Sophia laughed. 'Now, don't she look just like a bale of cotton that didn't sell?'

We pulled over in front of Lossie's house. Heads popped out of all the neighboring windows and shouted greetings to Miss Sophia as she made her way around a rooting pig to the edge of the porch.

'Mornin', Aunt Mame,' Miss Sophia shouted to the deaf old woman sitting on Lossie's porch.

'Oh, that you, honey?' Aunt Mame answered.

'Yes, it's me, Aunt Mame. I jus' wanted to find out if you are gettin' your money all right?'

'Fine. Jus' fine. Comes of a Tuesday. Clara gets it an' counts out what she spends. Right befo' me.'

Clara was the daughter who had come out of the house to stand beside Aunt Mame's chair. Miss Sophia explained later that the relief check was the whip-hand the old woman held over her children. Otherwise they would have thrown her out long ago.

Around the corner we surprised a journeyman clothes and furniture peddler trying to sell his wares to a mother and a daughter, both over sixty-five and on Old Age Assistance. The peddler's truck bore a sign: 'We clothe your body — We furnish your home. Coats \$9.00 — 50¢ down, 50¢ a week.'

Miss Sophia's appearance killed the peddler's sale, cold.

Stopping a moment, Miss Sophia asked the daughter how her mother was feeling since a recent sick spell. It seemed she was 'doin' po'ly, thank you.'

'Her nerves is too low an' if'n she stoops she gits the swimmin' in the head.'

'There goes Cheerful Sam Gadsden,' Miss Sophia said as she returned the wave of an old Negro going down the

street. 'He's got one tooth left in his head, an' it's the most amazin' hook you ever saw. Every time I see him I ask him why it hasn't cut his lip off. He's worked for Mr. Padgett all his life, an' now he's too old to work, Mr. Padgett lets him stay on rent free. Except for his food an' the fancy medicine pills he likes to take, Sam doesn't need much.'

Miss Sophia steered her car down a washboard dirt road. We bumped over a wooden bridge and came to a halt by a patch of vegetable garden. At the head of the cabbage row an old white-headed Negro stood gnawing on the end of a bone. He kept on gnawing away at it while he talked. A bright-skin girl the color of a new saddle hung on to his coat-tail and peeked out at us. Her bare toes were buried in the ooze of a mud puddle and her dress seemed almost too strained to hold her growing body any longer. Her blunt breasts pressed against the threadbare gingham as if she had slipped cups from a child's tea set inside her blouse.

Miss Sophia had explained to me as we drove up that the old Negro was on Old Age Assistance, getting eleven dollars a month. It took two dollars a month for wood, seven dollars and a half for groceries, and a neighbor charged him fifty cents of what was left to drive him to town to buy his month's supplies.

'I bought me a 'coon this mawnin', I did, Mis' Sophie,' he grinned. "'S good eatin' and I promised Les Britt I'm goin' to pay 'm the quarter he charged me fo' it just the minute I get me my re-lief check. You ain' goin' to fin' ol' me gettin' in debt. Naw, ma'm.'

'My, you're gettin' to be a big girl, Sookie,' Miss



Sophia said to the girl hiding behind the old Negro's back. 'How old are you now?'

'Don' ac' like a ninny, chile,' the old fellow said as he shook the child's hand free of his coatsleeve. 'Speak up when Mis' Sophie talk to you.'

'I'm 'levun, goin' on twelve,' she whispered.

'She the shyies' gran'chile I got. Maybe it's a good thing, too, smart as chillun are these days. I'd hate to see Sookie come down with a young'n by some no-'count boy 'fo' she gits a chainece to git herself married right.'

Sookie snickered and buried her face in the old man's back.

'Are you gettin' your commodities to help out?' Miss Sophia asked.

'No'm, I ain't, an' I'd like to have 'm — on'y I ain't got me no comمودesty card.'

'Well, I'll see one's made out for you when I get back to the office tonight.'

'Thank you, ma'm; thank you, ma'm — I shore do. I'm this-a-way, Mis' Sophie: if somebody gives me a han'ful of husks I take 'em, an' wets 'em and feeds 'em to m' chickens an' says thank you very much.'

'Well, you take care of yourself now, an' I'll see you next visit out this way. Good-bye, Sookie.' And we were gone.

Riding along the road, Miss Sophia told me how the commodity cards work. They are Federal Surplus Commodity cards and entitle the bearer to a share of the surplus commodities which the Federal Government distributes as a form of supplementary help. To be eligible for a commodity card your income must be

insufficient to take care of your minimum needs. It takes you about two weeks to get a card after you have made application for one.

‘For instance,’ Miss Sophia explained, ‘the Gov’ment will ship in a carload of apples they have bought at a fair market price from farmers who have a surplus crop. We run ads in the *Herald* notifyin’ the people who have cards to come in an’ get them, an’ they bring their buckets an’ pans an’ take the apples home with them, free of charge.

‘People with cards are eligible twice a month for staples like flour, corn meal, bacon, raisins, rice, salt pork an’ prunes. We call these regular commodities an’ the amount a card-holder gets depends on the number of people in his family an’ the amount we have to distribute. It’s never a case of first come, first served.’

Twice a year, Miss Sophia told me, persons with cards may call for wearing-apparel and bedclothes made in the W.P.A. sewing-rooms. Commodity trucks leave the regular goods at designated community dispensaries. In the smaller and outlying communities, the local merchants and crossroads storekeepers will handle the distribution of these goods, free of charge. Everybody concerned benefits by the commodity-card system. The farmer gets a fair price for surplus crops he could not have sold otherwise, and the consumer receives supplies he could not afford to buy for himself and his family.

‘The commodity cards have been a great help to me in tryin’ to administer properly to fam’lies who don’t fall into any of our three regular classifications,’ Miss Sophia went on. ‘Specially so in cases of fam’lies where there are a lot of children.

'The Negroes have a time tryin' to pronounce "commodity." It usually comes out "commodis" or "commodesty." I once asked an old fellow if he got his commodities all right. He said "Yes'm," kind of sheepishly, an' went into the house an' brought out an old chamberpot from under the bed.

'Wait, yonder comes somebody I've got to see.' She slowed down to talk to a copper-colored woman who was balancing a basket of clothes miraculously on the top of her head.

'Mornin', Aunt Tina.'

'Mawnin', Miss Sophie.'

'How are you?'

'Tol'able, thank you, ma'm.'

'How's Uncle John gettin' along this month?'

'Not so good, but I done learnt to make out wid it.'

'Now, has John had that bad tooth pulled like I told him?'

'He aims to, but seems like he ain't made it up in his mind to have it pulled. He keeps a-goin' to, then it seems like by time he's sot to go the bad feelin' wears off. Then, too, his ol' dream been worryin' him some lately an' that takes his min' of'n his tooth some.'

'Oh, that. Well, you tell him if he doesn't have it out when his next check comes I'm goin' to report him. Now, you hear me?'

'Yes'm. I'm goin' to tell him soon's I get home an' put these clothes down. I am that, Mis' Sophie.'

'Well, see to it that you do, now. Good-bye, Aunt Tina.'

'Well'm.'

'You jus' have to scare 'em a little sometimes, like children, or they won't do what they're supposed to do.'

'What kind of a dream is that of Uncle John's that'll cure his toothache?' I asked her.

'Why, it seems Uncle John got drunk on corn whisky one night an' comin' home past the cemetery he lay down with his head on a footstone an' went to sleep. An' while he was asleep an angel, accordin' to Uncle John, came to him in a dream and tol' him to take an axe an' go out through Onora Valley an' kill all the Christians. An' Uncle John says he searched from mornin' 'til night in his dream, an' look as hard as he would, he couldn't fin' but two Christians in all the Valley. Ever since then his dream has preyed on his mind on account of he figgers the Lord meant for him to do somethin' about it.'

Miss Sophia pulled over in front of a shack and blew the horn several times. Presently a Negro woman came to the door.

'Mornin', Phoebe. Can you come out to the car a minute?'

'Yes'm.'

For more than six years Phoebe had been taking care of a crazy husband who was afraid of the light. She kept him in a dark room in the back of the house and occasionally, if she could get somebody to help her, would take him out at night. But if he got away from her he would hide in the first deep, dark hole he could find and then Phoebe would have to call the police to help her look for him and get him back in the house. Finally, he got so bad they had to take him away to the State Hos-

pital at Chattahoochee and Miss Sophia was calling to find out how Phoebe was getting along.

'I jus' don' want people to think I'm tryin' to put somethin' over on the county,' she said to Miss Sophia. 'I miss the Ol' Age 'sistance you all was sendin' to he'p out, but I'll make along wid the dollar I get ev'y week fo' washin' Mis' Bell's clothes. I got me my commodis card and I fishes some. I'll make out wid it an' I'll be right glad to have him back when his min' gets fit ag'in.'

We turned down a road the Negroes call Sawdust Avenue, to a settlement known as Sawmill Quarters. The Quarters are eight shacks that once housed workers for a sawmill operating in that section. The shacks are all rented, for eight dollars a month. Five of the families are white and the other three Negroes. Two of the families live off their Aid to Dependent Children grants. One family is on W.P.A., and the rest live off their commodity cards and whatever they may make from occasional odd jobs. There are no toilet facilities and one well furnishes drinking water for all eight families.

'You can't jus' tear 'em down,' Miss Sophia explained, 'or these people would have no place to go. One woman from town wanted to buy 'em and repair 'em enough to make 'em at least livable, but while she was askin' for a five-year tax exemption from the township, the deal got into politics. It seems one of the commissioners had his eye on the Quarters with an idea towards buyin' 'em an' raisin' the rent. An' he didn't mean after they had been improved, either.

'We might as well get out here an' walk, the roads through here are so bad.'

We got out of the car and tiptoed our way through the mire to a pathway leading to the Negro shack where Miss Sophia had to call.

Down the path a way, we passed a gangling white boy leaning against a ramshackly pigpen which looked just about strong enough to hold the two huge hogs wallowing around inside.

'Which one of those two hogs is your fav'rite, George?'

'H'tit don' differ, Mis' Sophia,' the boy drawled. 'One of 'em's jus' as good as the other — fack, a dern sight better.'

'I've got to call on old Allen here first. He's kind of a pet of mine. His brother Turner lives in that house back down yonder, but we'll stop here now.'

The shack where Allen lived alone was a two-room affair, one room built directly behind the other. I looked carefully to be sure of my first impression that there was only one window in the entire house. This was a square cut in the side of one room and it could be closed by letting down its wooden shutter. A lazy old dog was curled up at the foot of the three-step leading up to the tumbledown porch. A crêpe myrtle tree blocked the steps. Miss Sophia pointed to a rusty assortment of handleless kitchen pans, filled with dirt and used for flowerpots. The ferns in them were dead and dried out.

'They belonged to Allen's wife before she died. He says he jus' can't bear to throw them out.'

A shaggy clump of bamboo was growing straight up through the yard fence. A live-oak tree shaded the corner of the porch.

Allen crept out of the house, wearing the strangest-looking coat I have ever seen. It looked like a woolly dog suddenly bereft of its fur. It hung on his gaunt frame like a tarpaulin that had slipped off the back of a wagon.

Allen lives on ten dollars a month Old Age Assistance. He has no commodity card. Money for his rent, kerosene and tobacco is taken out first, and the rest of it goes to his brother Turner, who furnishes him his food. Turner also gets ten dollars a month, so between the two of them they have twenty dollars to get along on.

'How are you today, Allen?' Miss Sophia enquired. He wouldn't sit down while Miss Sophia was there, and he held his battered old hat in his hand. He had on a new pair of bright yellow shoes.

'I don' know how I don' feel, but I'm gittin' along somehow or other. Somehow, I jus' cain' git my head cleared.'

He had to stop talking until he could get over a coughing spell.

'I likes to be's clean, eben tho' I'm old. I'm old, I knows that. But, I got me two shirts and I washes one while I wears the other.'

Miss Sophia wrote him out a note to take into town for a commodity card.

'Will this here get me some market meat?' he enquired longingly.

'I'm afraid it isn't good for market meat, but when you take it in, they'll give you some new warm clothes, Uncle Allen.'

'Well'm,' he answered, with a trace of disappoint-

ment in his voice. 'An' I thanks you, I do, I thanks you,' he said as he made his way back into the shack.

Turner had seen Miss Sophia drive up and hadn't waited for her to come down to see him. He came up to the car after he was sure Allen had gone back into the house.

'How do you feel Allen's gettin' along, Turner? Looks to me like he's gettin' pretty feeble.'

'Allen's done got to be like a chile, Mis' Sophie. I was there wid his breakfast this mornin' an' when I went back wid his dinner, he say, "Turner, you been here befo' today?" I tell him "Sho' I been here Allen, wid yo' breakfast." "I declar'," he say to me, "I thought I musta dreamt that, sho'."'

'He isn't gettin' too much for you, is he, Turner?'

'Oh, no, ma'm, Mis' Sophie, I can look a'ter him, all right. Allen'd die of a pinin' heart if you was to put *him* away.'

'Pinin' heart,' Miss Sophia explained to me, 'is just as much a disease among the Negroes as diphtheria or typhoid fever or anything else.

'Look yonder at old Aunt Sue Broadhurst. She's sittin' there almos' blind. She's already on Old Age, so there isn't any use changing her over to Aid to the Blind. The woman next door looks after her. Aunt Sue sits on her porch an' gets along fine. Most people would criticize me for not havin' her put in the county home, but I know the minute I'd have her put away she'd die of the pinin' heart.'

As we drove away from Sawmill Quarters Miss Sophia turned to me and smiled.



'I know all this looks squalid an' dirty an' unhealthy to you. But we found out a long time ago that we couldn't personally wash all the faces of the underprivileged. You soon find out that there are more important things than bein' clean. You can't make people wash unless they want to — our job is to try to make them want to. They will be clean about visit time, because they feel that cleanliness is necessary to their grant, but we can't do anythin' to make them stay clean in between times.'

We rode along the highway through the celery fields awhile before Miss Sophia made her next call.

'Pride an' fear are the obstacles we have to overcome. The applicant always has a feelin' of resentment over the fact that he has to ask for help. Then when that feelin' of pride is broken down, he makes a grab for all he can get, an' invariably becomes a grasper and a criticizer. That's the picture the taxpayer usually gets of the man on relief.

'Our great problem is to graduate the budget successfully to care for the absolute wants of everybody entitled to our help. We first try to meet the minimum needs of the people in line for assistance. It's a mathematical nightmare to try to stretch our limited program to the point of over-all protection for the upwards of a hundred families on relief in this district, because livin' conditions vary an' the sizes of the families vary. We don't get the cooperation we should from the people because most of them are afraid that if they report any outside help it will be deducted from their grants. They are always afraid of jealous neighbors reportin' any

signs of prosperity an' once a man gets on relief, it t him a mighty long time to get off. He's afraid to g ble on the chances of losin' the security of his grant v any kind of a 'job that isn't a sure thing. Fear is basis of nine-tenths of our trouble in tryin' to admini properly.'

We called next on a white man, living alone in a fa house. Miss Sophia explained that he had inher several hundred thousand dollars at the time of father's death — a considerable fortune in any s town. He had married a socially ambitious wife, y his junior.

'Speakin' of your children of the boom,' said M Sophia, 'he was cert'nly a child in the head if no years. It's strange what a young skirt will do to mid aged glands. He built her a fine home in the cou where she could play at station-wagon society. Tl was a private sanatorium for drunks an' nervous c across the road from their place and when she l complainin' that the screamin's of the patients anno her, he bought it for thirty thousand dollars an' ha torn down to please her. Nat'rally, after bad real es investments took what money Simon Rivers' bank n't get, she up an' left him. Said they were incomj ible. Now he's on Old Age Assistance.'

We stopped at a cottage on Geneva Avenue that half-buried in banana trees and flame vines for M Sophia to make her regular report on the welfare of sweet, storybook kind of old ladies who took in sev for a living until their sight got so bad they couldn't to sew any more. They share the cottage with t

younger brother, a man in his fifties, who is sickly most of the time.

'They live in the eternal fear that somebody will tell Buddy that what ails him is cancer,' Miss Sophia whispered when she came back to the car.

'Now,' said Miss Sophia, as we drove in the direction of town, 'I'm goin' to take you to a *place*. Sometimes I know the Lord made the Pearsall family jus' to try my patience. Don' you ever dare tell anybody I told you, but after many a visit to see 'em I get so exasperated I feel like I'd love to lif' my foot an' kick Mrs. Lyde's teeth in.

'The crazy Pearsalls, we call 'em at the office. The gran'mother is the least trouble, on account of she has acute Bright's disease an's in bed all the time. Mrs. Lyde is the mother, an' she talks all the time in a high-pitched voice that nearly drives me crazy. There are five children at home, all under sixteen, an' Dessie, the oldest girl who's in trainin' to be a nurse over at the State Hospital, is eighteen.

'I was assigned to the case right after Charlie Pearsall killed himself a couple of years ago. He had been a World War veteran an' was pretty badly gassed up in France. When the war was over he went down to Texas to visit his sister, an' while he was there he met Miss Lyde. She had jus' been jilted by a sweetheart she had helped send through school, so she said, an' married Charlie on the rebound. The children started comin' regularly after that. Bert, the oldest boy, is sixteen. I tried to get him to apply for a C.C.C. job, but he said he reckoned he didn't want to be a water-boy for any

nigras. Addie Belle is fourteen, an' good'n adolescent. Enough so's to give her mother a fit all the time. The last time I was by I gave her a long lecture about stayin' out late jukin' nights, an' smokin', an' all. But she's a determined little piece, an' she told me she didn't smoke, but if people didn't stop naggin' her about it she was goin' to start. Lillian's the sickly one. She's nine an' can't go to school half the time because the asthma bothers her so much she can't breathe an' the school-room stifles her so. I know half her trouble is from bad tonsils, but I can't get Mrs. Lyde to quit talkin' long enough to take her in to the county doctor. Theodore sticks by his gran'mother most of the time an' kinder watches what goes on around him in awe. An' the last thing Charlie did before he put his pistol in his mouth an' pulled the trigger was to get Mrs. Lyde with Dolph, the baby. He's two now.

'Old Charlie ev'dently had a time of it before he killed himself. I never could figger out whether it was the madhouse he lived in or the bad health he had made him do it. He picked up a mighty bad stomach an' a few years before he shot himself he drank too heavy. His lungs wouldn't let him breathe right. He was a night watchman for the railroad an' sometimes they'd bring him home drunk right off the job. Then, he'd have fits of remorse an' swear he'd never do it again. But before long he'd be at it again, an' one night after he'd sobered up he took his old army pistol an' blew his brains right out. The doctor blamed it on his bein' melancholy.

'Now it's my job to see that the whole lot of 'em get

enough to eat an' wear on forty-eight dollars a month. It's pretty exasperatin' when they do things like sell a perfectly good cow that furnished milk for the young'ns for forty dollars under the pretense of buyin' a better one for the same price an' then take the money an' all pile into a bus an' go to see Dessie at the State Hospital.

'Well, here we are,' she said, as we drove up in front of a bungalow that looked in livable enough condition. It needed painting badly and there were holes in the screens and no curtains on the windows, but the roof looked solid and the doorsteps weren't falling down like the ones in front of so many of the houses we had visited during the day.

'Come on, an' I'll take you into bedlam.'

Suddenly, the front door burst open and a boy dashed out of the house toward the gate.

'Howdy, Mis' Sophie!'

'Hello, Bert. Where're you off to in such a hurry?'

'Longwood, to the dog track. Fellow tol' me if I'd hurry right down there I might be able to get a job exercisin' the dogs 'round the track. 'S all right, Mis' Sophie; Ma says the outside work might do me good. I got a ride now. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.' And he was out of sight around the corner.

Mrs. Lyde was sitting in the corner by the hearth rocking Dolph in her lap when we went into the room. Dolph was lost to this world in the sweetness of his baby thumb, on which he occasionally made gurgling sounds in his sleep.

'Cain't get up to speak to you, Mis' Sophie,' whined

Mrs. Lyde. 'M' feet's too swollen to stand on 'em.' And from then on until we left the house she never stopped talking. Miss Sophia took Dolph out of her arms and placed him on the unmade bed in the corner. Through the dining-room door I could see that the dirty breakfast dishes were still on the table. The door to the grandmother's room was closed.

'Right a'ter breakfast I walked all the way down to the Supply Company to beg Mr. Biggers to give Bert a job clerkin' in his store. He said he'd try, the first openin' he had. So y' see, Mis' Sophie, we does try to he'p ourselves. I does. Even if it do cause m' feet to swell from walkin' the roads. Now Bert's gone down to Longwood to the track to try an' get'm somethin' to do. I hates to think about him hangin' round with them gamblers down there, but if'n he does get a job down there, it'll on'y be while they have the races. I could have asked Mr. Thompson for a job for him at the groc'ry store, but I owes Mr. Thompson so much fo' groc'ries I've had to change over to James's Market for a while, an' I didn't think it'd be quite right to ask him a favor jus' yet. An' *then*, when I come home from Biggers', what do I fin' but Addie Belle sick over there on the cot, sent home from school an' the school nurse here, puttin' ice on her stomach.'

'Lyde,' a thin voice called from the grandmother's room.

'I'll be there t'reckly, Momma, jus' as soon as Mis' Sophie's through with me,' she shouted, without losing a breath.

Addie Belle, a pretty dark-haired child who hadn't

found a chance to say anything up until then, smiled at Miss Sophia from her cot under the window.

'What's the matter, child? You look kinder pale.'

'I tried to get Momma not to call the doctor an' all. I told her it wasn't nothin' but that ——'

'It's a plain case of 'pendicitus or ulc'rated stomach.'

'It's nothin' but that barbecue we all went to Sunday night, Momma, an' you know it.'

'S funny it didn't hurt *me* none. Nor Theodore, nor Lillian.'

'What did you have for breakfast this mornin', Addie Belle, before you got off to school?'

'Nothin',' the child answered Miss Sophia.

'What time did the nurse bring you home from school?'

'Bout two.'

'What'd you have for lunch?'

Addie Belle didn't answer for a moment.

'Pickles an' olives,' she finally admitted sheepishly.

'What did the school nurse say about Addie Belle havin' appendicitis, Mrs. Lyde?'

'Waaaal,' Mrs. Lyde finally drawled, 'she did say somethin' about her blood not countin' up enough to make 'pendicitus, but I tell you when Momma in there had 'pendicitus I 'member it started the very same way. Pains in the stomach an' a cold sweat. An' school nurse or no school nurse, no chil' of mine is goin' back to walk up to an' down them stone steps with an' ulc'rated stomach, I mean 'pendicitus, until I'm sure it ain't. I'm a comin', Momma,' she answered to the woman's voice in the next room.

'How *is* your mother gettin' along, Mrs. Lyde?' Miss Sophia enquired.

'Some better, I reckon, Mis' Sophia. She don't seem to wet the bed as much as she used to. Be back soon's I see to her,' she said as she ambled out of the room on her swollen feet.

'Miss Sophie, get Momma to let me up from here,' Addie Belle whispered as soon as her mother was out of the room. 'I ain't got nothin' but a plain ol' stomach-ache I picked up Sunday night at Silver Lake from eatin' too much of that sorry barbecue, an' I got a date tonight with my steady.'

'Oh, so that's what's worryin' you now?'

'Yes'm. He's mighty nice. *You'd* approve of him, even, Mis' Sophie. I met him Christmas time when I was workin' at the ten-cent store. He's the 'ssistant manager an' I'm afraid if I stand him up he'll be mad.'

'Where were you goin' to meet him?'

'At prayer meetin'. Then we were goin' on jukin' from there.'

'Does your mother know about him?'

'No'm.'

'Well, he sounds like a nice enough boy, from what you tell me about him.'

'Yes'm.'

'Then why don't you invite him out an' have him meet your mother?'

Addie Belle didn't say anything, she just dropped her head a little.

'Don't you think it would be nice if I called him for



you when I got back to the office an' told him you're sick, so he could come out an' see you here tonight?'

Then the child looked Miss Sophia squarely in the face.

'Would you want *your* boy friend to know you lived in a place like this?'

Theodore was tagging onto his mother's skirt-tail when she came back into the room. He was dragging a piece of green glass by a string and with every breath was begging his mother to retie the string. Then after Mrs. Lyde would tie it the boy would fuss and whine that she hadn't tied it to suit him and cry until she had to do it again. Finally, she screamed at him at the top of her voice.

'Get out of here into the yard with that play-pretty, you Theodore, you, an' if you come back into this house until I call you, I'll tan your hide!'

At this moment, Lillian came home from school, and as soon as she got into the house and said hello to Miss Sophia she started nagging her mother to let her go across the street and play with a friend. Mrs. Lyde kept interrupting a long stream of conversation directed to Miss Sophia with 'noes' until Lillian began to cry. Finally, in desperation, Mrs. Lyde shouted her consent.

'Yes, yes, yes!' she screamed. 'That's all they think of, Mis' Sophie, play — play — all the time. You don' see 'em cryin' to wash the dishes piled up in the kitchen, do you? Get out of here, you Lillian, an' see to it you take your brother Theodore along with you.'

'If I have to drag *him* along with me I don't want to go!' Lillian cried, and ran into the dining-room and slammed the door.

By this time, Miss Sophia looked a wreck. But eventually, when the 'social hour' was over, she managed to get down to the business at hand so we could leave.

The business at hand consisted mostly of trying to help Mrs. Pearsall figure out a way to stretch the family's forty-eight-dollar Aid to Dependent Children grant to take care of their seventy-five-dollar monthly needs.

In the course of conversation that followed, it developed that the Home Owners' Loan Corporation agent was threatening to take the house away from her if she didn't make some kind of a payment on the mortgage they held. She declared she'd sell the place for two hundred dollars to anybody who'd assume the mortgage, but Miss Sophia didn't give her much encouragement.

However, the monthly budget was rearranged in such a way that after a little something was put aside for Mr. Thompson on the old grocery bill and a little more for James's Market on the new, and the regular items like kerosene for the stove, wood for the fireplace, water, lights, clothing, medicine for Lillian's asthma and property upkeep were taken care of, there'd be enough left over to stall off an immediate foreclosure. Miss Sophia said she herself would see to it that Lillian and Addie Belle would get their lunches free at the school cafeteria and left instructions for Mrs. Pearsall to take Theodore to her own dentist to have his two aching baby teeth extracted.

Miss Sophia caught her breath when we stopped at the Ball Park Filling Station for a Coca-Cola.

'Ah, me,' she said as she put the bottle back on the

counter, 'a lot of ghosts walk the streets of this town since the boom. See yonder, there goes ol' Mr. Preston and his nigra.' She pointed out the filling station window to a fine, aristocratic-looking old man following an aged Negro down the road. 'Now I wonder what those two are doin' pokin' around away out here by the ball park? Sometimes I spot 'em two or three miles from town.'

It appeared through the window that the white man was quarreling amiably with the Negro as they made their way along. The Negro was nodding attentively.

'It looks to me like a case of the blind telling the halt how to lead him,' I ventured.

'Why, that's exactly what it is. You know who that is. That's Mr. Preston, who used to be president of the National Bank.'

And so it was. And Miss Sophia told me the story of what had happened to Mr. Preston since I went away to New York, and how he got hold of John, his Negro.

Mr. Preston's bank carried the financial load of the town after the downfall of the Simon Rivers dynasty. When the general collapse carried it down, too, Mr. Preston cashed in his own bonds and sold his own property to help pay off the depositors. He was that honest.

He had deeded his home to his wife years before and when she died, two years after the failure of the bank, she left the deed to it in trust whereby he could remain there as long as he lived.

The town has grown in around the old-fashioned little dwelling, which nestles in the shadow of a new hotel building. From the street it looks as though it had been

deserted for years. The dark green blinds are closed on the windows. The steps are partly rotted away and rocking-chairs on the porch are kept leaning against the wall. The hedge is uncut and the shrubbery untrimmed, and what was once a smooth lawn is now a patch of weeds.

‘He lived for his wife,’ Miss Sophia said. ‘The loss of his money an’ the failure of his bank was nothin’ compared to the loss of her. He hasn’t let her bedroom be touched since she died, an’ that’s a good ten years or more now. I saw it when I went to visit him the first time. Everythin’ is jus’ exactly as she left it. The flower stems are still in the vases, an’ her little perfume bottles are where she placed them on the dresser, an’ he won’t let a picture or a bureau scarf be dusted. It’s a pretty dusty, depressin’ atmosphere, when you think of all the good he’s done in this town in his time an’ all the money he’s given away.

‘He doesn’t seem to notice that the plaster has nearly all fallen off the dining-room ceilin’ an’ I expect it’s still on the floor. Up until John came along he spent his time in his bedroom at home, listenin’ to news broadcasts over the radio, or sittin’ on the benches downtown talkin’ politics to whoever had the time to spare. The woman who runs the new hotel next to his house lets him eat his dinners there an’ pay her whenever he can. He managed to save enough from his creditors to care for himself a couple of years, an’ then one day, somebody downtown came to me an’ asked me if I thought Mr. Preston was gettin’ enough to eat.

‘You jus’ can’t go up to a man as proud as Mr. Pres-

ton an' ask him if he wants to go on relief, no matter if you *do* know he's about to starve to death.

'I knew that Mr. Preston looked forward to goin' to ride whenever anybody had the time to stop by an' pick him up for a bit. I stopped by for him one afternoon, an' when he got in an' we were ridin' around, I kinder 'proached the subject of askin' for Old Age to him. He was too full of himself at first. "Ah," he said, "the times Mrs. Preston an' I used to have, sailin' through the countryside in the fine car I bought for her. Mrs. Preston used to like to ride through the groves when the orange blossoms were out," he wandered on. "She'd always make me get out an' pick her some fine sprays for the house. An' it wasn't always s' easy to get started again in the sand. Sometimes I'd have to jack the car up to get a fence post under it enough to pry us out of the sand," he laughed an' rambled on as we drove along. An' he tol' the story of gettin' stuck in Christenberry's grove one Sunday afternoon an' how Chris came runnin' out of his house with a gun to scare away trespassers ha'f a dozen times. "Christenberry," he shouted, "put that gun away before I foreclose on this grove an' take the dam' thing away from you. My pardon, Mrs. Preston." An' then he'd laugh an' tell it all over again five minutes later.

'You've got to get hardened enough in this business to see through clear eyes, or your heart will run away with you every time. But that afternoon when we got back an' Mr. Preston made me go out to the garage an' sit down in the old-model car out there, with the tires all rotted away, an' the leather seat under me stiffened

an' cracked, I tell you that's a time I couldn't hold back the tears.

'I couldn't get him interested in talkin' about the grant that first afternoon I tried, but the followin' Sunday I saw him come to church an' he was so feeble an' so near blind I made up my mind to do somethin' about him the very next day. So, Monday morning I found him home, listenin' to his radio. An' it was a good thing I happened to go by, for that very morning when he had tried to fill his oil heater with kerosene it caught on fire an' in tryin' to put it out himself he got all blistered an' burned on the back of his hands. Bad as he felt, he remembered to apologize for the littered look of things in the room, sayin' he was afraid to let anybody clean it up for fear they'd put things where he'd never be able to fin' them again.

'I got a doctor to him to look after the burns, an' then went right over to see Leon Bridges — he's head of the Masons in Onora. An' between us we got him to apply, an' then we both felt better, knowin' he was at least eatin' regular. Members of the Lodge took turns awhile seein' that the stove was filled, because there's no tellin' when he might've burned the house down, with him not bein' able to see like that.

'John goin' yonder is a bit of my handiwork, though I couldn't have thought of it without the Lodge. Leon came to me one day after a meetin' at the Hall an' said they'd talked about Mr. Preston the night before an' would be glad to pay two dollars a week towards hirin' a colored man to look after him, if I knew of somebody I felt I could trust.

'Then I remembered John. He was on Old Age, too, but seemed spry enough to fill the bill. When Leon an' I went to see him, an' put the idea of his goin' to live with Mr. Preston an' lookin' out for him up to him, why, you've never seen such a happy nigra in all your days. "Praise Gawd, Miss Sophie!" he shouted. "Anything to get away from that naggin' wife of mine, an' to be *Mr. Preston's* nigra would be somethin' I wish my po' mammy could come back from heben to see."

'Well, you see for yourself it's worked out fine. John spends all his time with Mr. Preston except for the time out he takes to run over to the colored café on Palmetto Avenue for his meals. An' afternoons like this they get out for walks around town. It makes me feel mighty good when I see 'em, knowin' how important it all makes John feel an' how happy Mr. Preston is with somebody to boss around.'

When we passed them on the way to town, Miss Sophia blew the horn and waved at them. John took off his hat and bowed, and as we turned the corner I could see him telling Mr. Preston who it was.

'Not all of our visits are full of humor an' tears,' Miss Sophia said. 'Sometimes we fin' ourselves in pretty fright'nin' surroundin's. For instance, it always gives me the willies to have to drive out to Hadleys' Point by myself. Here, take a look at these.'

She opened the compartment on the dashboard and handed me a sheaf of yellow and pink papers bound with a rubber band. All of them looked weather-stained. I slipped the band off and looked at a crazy assortment of verses written in a kind of pig-Latin.

Under each bit of writing there were caricatures of pigs in pants, some of them drinking out of whisky bottles, others fishing with poles.

Petters Dogs  
Paradise!  
Ogotz! Stugotz!  
Strunz! Acocamogotz!  
Wineska! Beerska! Aleska!  
Rumska! Ginska! Whiska!  
Petska! Petska! Ogotska!

I asked her why all the papers were pierced with holes.

'That's all some of Harry Hadley's handiwork. He's a loony for sure, but not crazy enough yet to be put away. The road down to the Hadleys' is dark an' lonesome, an' fine for pettin' parties. Harry spies on the couples parked along it near the house nights, an' in the daytime he scribbles these notes an' sticks them on the bushes to frighten them away. He seems to get a vicarious thrill out of spyin' on the cars. One night, though, a limb breakin' under his feet or somethin' gave him away when he was peekin' at a fellow an' his girl, an' the fellow chased Harry through the woods until he stumbled an' fell into a brier patch an' nearly got his snoopin' eyes scratched out.

'The fishin' is good on the river below the Hadleys', an' Harry hates the people who park their cars near-by to go down to the water. Some of these notes are written to them. Here, isn't this a crazy one, now?' She pointed to the verse scrawled on a piece of torn pasteboard.

Hey Giacomo!  
Ogotz! Geta da



littla Fisha! Eata  
da headsa, da tailsa!  
da gutsa! Ogotz!  
Nica! Oh Nica!  
Wanta dema alla!  
Ogontz! Stugotz! Strunz!

'What in the world do you have to do out on Hadleys' Point?' I asked her when I had finished reading the verses.

'Ol' Mrs. Hadley — that's Harry's mother — is on Old Age, and I have to go out there once a month to call on her. It's a creepy road, too, with frogs croakin' in the swamp an' herons flappin' up out of the mud. I always feel like Harry's goin' to jump out of the woods an' get me an' leave me lyin' in the marsh for some ol' 'gator to chew on.

'I blame Mrs. Hadley for gettin' Harry's mind in such a mess. Her husband died an' left her with two little boys. Harry was one of them an' the other one was drowned one day when the boys were swimmin' off the Point. After that, she wouldn't let Harry out of her sight. She seemed to be afraid somethin' might happen to him an' leave her alone in the world. If Harry'd want to swim she'd tie a rope around his waist an' sit on the bank an' hold it so he couldn't get away from her. She bathed him an' dressed him until he was full grown, an' even now when she's sick an' cain't get out of bed, Harry has to stay where he can hear her call him. She wouldn't ever let him go around with girls for fear one of them would want to marry him an' take him away from her. He's goin' on fifty now an' nobody in this world would want him. The only time he can ever get

away from her is nights after she's asleep. Well, I'm jus' hopin' an' prayin' that one of these nights while he's out prowlin' around he doesn't get himself into any worse trouble than bein' chased into a brier patch.'

We turned down First Street toward the courthouse and Miss Sophia's office. At the corner she called my attention to two girls in Salvation Army uniforms standing under the lamp post. They were singing from a hymn book and the youngest was holding a tambourine to catch any friendly pennies.

'Oh, excuse me a minute,' Miss Sophia said. 'There're the Turner children.' She pulled over to the curbing and waited for them to finish a chorus of 'Almost Persuaded.'

'Julia Jean — Mary Ev'lyn — come over here a minute!'

'It's Mis' Sophie!' Mary Evelyn exclaimed, and came running to the car, careful not to spill the change in her tambourine.

'Oh, Mis' Sophie,' Julia Jean began excitedly, 'Mamma's got a letter from Doctor Leigh an' Amelia can come home for Christmas. He says *maybe* she'll be able to come in the spring, *to stay!*'

'Why, that's *wonderful*. I know your mamma will want to tell me all about it. I hated to stop you from your work, but I want you tell your mamma for me that I'll be out to the river Monday mornin' to see her.'

'Yes, ma'm,' they both said.

'Don't sing too late, now. You know she's always worried if you aren't home by supper time.'

'Yes'm. Mis' Sophie,' Julia Jean asked, 'could you

stay 'til we do "Throw Out the Life Line" for you? We're tryin' to collect four dollars this week an' people would think it was more important if they saw *you* were list'nin'.'

'Please, please, Mis' Sophie,' Mary Evelyn pleaded. 'We'll sing it fast!'

'All right. But you won't be mad if I have to leave after one verse?'

'No, ma'm!'

They sang it with such enthusiasm that Ed Purdy got up off the bench in front of the drugstore and dropped a coin in the tambourine. Mary Evelyn waved a quarter for us to see and as we drove off, the girls were swinging jubilantly into the second verse.

'Amelia is their older sister,' Miss Sophia explained. 'She's been in the Umatilla Hospital for crippled children for a long time now. The damp air of the fishin' village up the river where they live wasn't any too good for the child's twisted ankle bone an' I finally managed to get her in over there, hopin' some good would come of it.'

'There's a pathetic kind of a story in the way Mrs. Winifred has brought the girls up, lyin' to them all these years to make them believe she is *really* their mother, an' havin' to be as crafty as a mother fox all the time to protect them from the bad influences of a father who's shiftless enough to be Jeeter Lester's brother.'

We pulled into Miss Sophia's parking place in front of the courthouse and sat in the car while she went on with her story of Mrs. Winifred and the girls.

'The Turners came to Onora Valley a good many years ago. They had two baby girls, Amelia, who was, I guess, about three years old when they moved here from Savannah, an' Julia Jean, who must have been about one. Mary Ev'lyn was born right after they got here an' before any of their neighbors got to know Mrs. Winifred well enough to be with her at the time. They were livin' in town then — that was before things got so bad they moved out to the fishin' village.

'Turner worked in the railroad shops for a while. But it wasn't long before his health got so bad the doctor said he'd have to lay off work until his nerves got better. Then he started drinkin', as he put it, "to bolster up his nerves a bit," an' naturally he went from bad to completely awful.

'To try an' help out at home, he started fishin'. Holdin' a line in the front of a boat didn't interfere with his drinkin' at all. He could reach for his bottle without losin' a bite. Then the whisky got his back, an' the mosquitoes bit him full of malaria until he broke down completely. If he made a dollar an' a half a week on the river, he had to split that with whatever nigra he got to row for him, because he was too sickly to handle the boat himself any more.

'Well, anybody knows a woman can't raise three small children on shares in a dollar an' half, even if they did have fish to eat mornin', noon an' night. So, one day they came in an' applied for relief. The case was handed to me, an' in goin' over the records I saw they both had given their ages as fifty-eight, so the only way to help them was to grant them A.D.C. for the girls. I

figured it was just another case of a mother and father with children to feed an' clothe, until the check on their vital statistics started comin' back from Georgia. None of the birth records checked with the information Mrs. Winifred had given, an' the records on Amelia an' Julia Jean showed some other woman to be their mother. When I asked her about these irregularities she said Mr. Turner had been married before an' that they were his dead wife's children. Naturally, she said, when she married Turner they had come along as part of the family. She begged me not to let the girls know she wasn't their real mother, because they had come to her when they were so little she felt like they were hers, anyway. That sounded reasonable enough.

'Mrs. Winifred and Turner said they were born in North Carolina, an' since that state didn't start keepin' vital statistics until 1913, there wasn't anythin' we could do but take their word for it that they were both fifty-eight.

'The real puzzle came when I tried to find the records on Mary Ev'lyn, the youngest of the girls. From the story the Turners told, she had been born in Onora Valley a little while after they got here. But we couldn't find ~~any~~ record of it in the statistics office. Then one day I happened to think that maybe I should write up to Georgia — and back the record came, showin' Mary Ev'lyn had been born right there in Savannah, like the other two children.

'Well, I knew somethin' was wrong somewhere, an' I rode out to the river to have another talk with Mrs. Winifred. When I asked her about Mary Ev'lyn she

looked kind of caught like, an' she didn't say anythin' for a few minutes.

"Mr. Turner got into some trouble," she told me. "After his wife died, an' before he met me, he kinda got lonesome, I reckon, an' started runnin' around with a woman he shouldn't have. A pretty bad woman," she went on, "who had a house an' sold bootleg whisky. The police got her one night for sellin' the whisky, but they waited 'til after Mary Ev'lyn was born before they went to lock her up. Mary Ev'lyn's Turner's all right. But after he got that woman in trouble he met me at my boardin'-house I ran in Savannah. I got him straightened out again, an' the way things looked, it seemed to me that little ol' Mary Ev'lyn might just as well come along with the other children when we moved here, where Turner could get some work to do in the shops.

"I was careful not to get too frien'ly with folks," she went on, "an' the ones I met I let drop that I was expectin' — so when it was time for her to go to jail, I jus' went to bed for several days an' Turner brought the baby in to me one night from Savannah. A few days later, 'bout the usual time, I was up an' out, an' nobody's known the difference 'til now. An' you won't let the children know, will you, Mis' Sophie?" she kept on beggin' me. I told her there was nothin' in the rules that said I had to, an' for her not to worry about it any more. But I knew she was holdin' somethin' back, because the records showed that the same woman who was Amelia's an' Julia Jean's mother was Mary Ev'lyn's, too.

'But, I thought to myself, no matter who the mother

of these young'ns is, or why, they get hungry an' need clothes jus' like anybody else's — and I better push through some kind of a grant for them and we could argue about all the figures while they were eatin'. So, I got them twenty-eight dollars a month for the three girls, an' the Board only cut it down to twenty-five after I got Amelia into the hospital. *And*, it was *all* fixed so old Turner couldn't get any of it for whisky, either.

'Well, you know how things come up, an' what with listenin' to new tales of woe an' tryin' to keep my old cases goin' right, I never got back to lookin' into all the Turner records as much as I intended to — until one afternoon not long ago. It was awfully hot sittin' out there on their porch, and it seemed like the steam risin' off the river was givin' me a pure Turkish bath. As I was askin' all the usual questions I have to ask, an' jottin' the answers down on my tablet, I happened to look at old Turner, leanin' there against the porch post. I thought to myself, "You look mighty bad, even for a scoundrel. Mrs. Winifred," I said, "you know the girls'll be graduatin' from high school one of these days, an' since you an' Mr. Turner aren't old enough to get Old Age Assistance, maybe you'd better be thinkin' about what you should do. You know," I said, "I can help only so far, an' then *my* hands are tied."

"'Yes'm, I reckon we *had* better," she said, an' after a minute she got up an' went into the house. As I got up to go, she brought out a mess of fish wrapped up for me to take home with me. Well, I didn't think much about it, because she often did that. But when I got

home an' started to unwrap them to put in the icebox, I found a note from her wrapped in with them. It asked me to come back out to see her next mornin' while Mr. Turner was up the river fishin', as there was somethin' she had to tell me.

'I went, an' when we sat down on the porch again, she suddenly burst out cryin' so she couldn't talk. Then, when she got herself together she started talkin' an' tellin' me the truth an' she seemed so relieved to get it all off her mind that I could hardly keep up with her. An' as the story began to develop, these old hardened ears of mine were so stunned by the course of it, that I just sat there kinda numb an' let her grieve on.

'It seemed, to begin with, that Mrs. Winifred had been married before. All of her family had been railroadin' people, an' her husband worked on the railroad out of Savannah. They had a child, a boy, an' after her husband had been killed in a train wreck somewhere in Georgia, she *had* run a boardin'-house to make a livin' for them. Then, when the boy grew up, the railroad gave him a job on account of his father, an' one night when he was workin' in the yards, the headlight of a train blinded him an' he was run over an' killed by a switch engine.

'Turner ate at the boardin'-house, an' he seemed so sympathetic and understanding about it all that she got to lookin' to him for the only comfort she could find. Turner worked in the shops in Savannah. For a time after they were married, they *were* happy, an' he was a good provider an' insisted she close the boardin'-house, as he wanted a home he didn't have to share with a lot of hungry railroad brakemen.



'Then, one day quite by accident, Mrs. Winifred found out that Turner had lived for a number of years with a common, railroad-yard prostitute known around the shops as Julia Joy, an' that he was the father of her two baby girls. Even after he married Mrs. Winifred, Turner didn't stop seein' the Joy woman, and soon she was to bear him another child.

'When she confronted Turner with the story, he admitted it but he begged her not to leave him, sayin' that the thing had developed in the days before he had met her, an' promised if she would forgive him and stick by him he'd never see Julia again. Mrs. Winifred made Turner bring Amelia an' Julia Jean so she could see them, an' the minute she laid eyes on them all the old love she had known for her own dead son rose up in her an' she grew panicky about what might happen to them if they were left to grow up around Julia Joy. So she made Turner a proposition — if he would move away from Savannah where they could make a new start, an' if she could take the two children with her an' bring them up as her own, she'd stay with him.

'When the idea was put up to Julia Joy, she was all for it. The two babies were already interferin' with her business, an' she turned them right over to Mrs. Winifred, on condition that as soon as the new baby was born, Turner was to come get it, too.

'So they moved to Onora Valley because of the railroad shops here, an' when Mary Ev'lyn was born Turner went back to Julia Joy an' brought the baby to Mrs. Winifred in the middle of the night so everybody would think it was hers, just the way she said.

‘Everythin’ went fine there for a little while — then one day about three months later, they heard Julia Joy was dead. She died from complications after givin’ birth to a premature baby. Turner told Mrs. Winifred right out that it was his. He had spent one last night with her when he went up to Savannah to get Mary Ev’lyn.

‘Mrs. Winifred said after that she kinda froze all up inside an’ she’d nearly die every time Turner would get near her, much less try to have somethin’ to do with her, she loathed him so. But she was afraid to do anythin’ drastic like leave him, because the children were *his* and she was afraid of what might happen to them.

“‘So,” she said, “I’ve lied to ’em an’ loved ’em, an’ made ’em sleep right in the bed with me nights because you cain’t be too careful with young girls these days. An’ now they’ll soon be leavin’ me, as they should in life, an’ Turner’s about reached the end of his po’r ol’ sorry rope, an’ now I’d like to tell you that I’m goin’ on sixty-fo’r instead of fifty-eight, an’ maybe you can he’p me try to prove it, so’s I won’t jus’ starve to death when the time comes.”

‘She lied about her age for fear that when the girls got grown enough to really put two an’ two together they might realize she was too old to be their mother.

‘It took me the best part of a month to get it all straightened out for her, but the license for her first marriage gave her age as what she said it was — so with some swearin’ an’ notarizin’ while Turner was away on his boat, we finally got Mrs. Winifred fixed up so when the girls get married or move away, an’ old Turner

tuckers out, she'll get Old Age. And if anybody ever had assistance comin' to them, it's her. As for the girls, I don't guess they'll ever find out her secret.'

When Miss Sophia gathered up all her papers and we started up the courthouse steps, she was still worrying about Aid to Dependent Children.

'We have so little to do so much with,' she said. 'Maybe the children's appropriations are so small because they can't vote. After all, legislators are only politicians, an' I guess it's only natural for them to do the most good where they can get the most votes.'

# eleven

## *Tourists Accommodated*

**O**NORA VALLEY is trying to pull a rabbit out of its battered old hat. It is making a play for the tourist trade, Florida's most profitable industry.

Onora's position in the central part of the state, its location on the river, the easy driving distances to ocean beaches and most of Florida's famed attractions, the scores of fresh-water lakes around it brimming with game fish, the surrounding palmetto brush alive with game birds, and above all, its year-around climate which is comparable to Carolina springtime weather, should make it a natural for tourists.

Sidney Lanier found it to be 'the headquarters of those who desire to sport among the headwaters of the St. John's. Consumptives,' he wrote, 'are said to flourish in this climate; and there are many stories told of cadaverous persons coming here and turning out successful huntsmen and fishermen, of ruddy face and portentous appetite, after a few weeks.'

Most of the people of Onora Valley have not wanted it to grow beyond the size of a comfortable small town. Farmers and railroad men make up the greater part

of the working class. The men in the shops have no great desire for the town to grow because their wages remain the same, no matter how much the town improves, and too much progress would only increase the cost of living for them. The farmers are basically small-town folks who do not like to share their Saturday nights in town with pleasure-seekers from the North. The marketing agencies and finance companies who have ended up owning most of the land along Celery Avenue as a result of mortgage foreclosures, fight any drastic improvements because additional improvement bond issues would make their taxes prohibitive.

The turn to the tourist trade was, in most cases, a means of actual survival, but the frame of mind most folks were in before they let their houses become tourist homes was a good deal like the attitudes Miss Sophia encountered in breaking down the pride of people applying for relief. It was a hard thing to do, but once the finest people began putting out their tourists signs, the whole town went to it with vigor. Homes along the main streets with a room or two to rent for the night have been saved from tax foreclosures by the welcome dollars earned that way. One night while I was driving out Onora Avenue I counted more than a score of neon signs from town to Thirteenth Street. Cozy synonyms for Home, Sweet Home attract the weary tourists with promises of Beautyrest mattresses, Southern-fried chicken and tumblers of native orange juice. There might be a tinge of sadness in the sight of the magnificent celery mansions turned into tourist homes but for the fact that the owners have gone into the competition with genuine enthusiasm.

I slept one night on a cot on a side porch because my hostess had failed to tell her daughter that I was coming for the night and she had rented the guest room in the afternoon. The children of another old friend had been classmates of mine, and the last time I ate dinner with them they had all been home and it was an occasion of great joy, with a table piled with fine foods and the sideboard spattered with drippings from the silver egg-nog bowl. But on my last visit the children were not at home. A spinster who talked incessantly about her sister's farm in Virginia sat in one place. A retired school teacher tried to get in a few words about the local little-theatre movement, and the unemployed World War veteran who sat across from me wolfed his food as quickly as possible so he would not miss the twelve-thirty news broadcast. After dinner, my friend showed me his new hot-water heater with the pride he once saved for thoroughbred geldings and pedigreed pointers, and I gave him my advice as to how best to turn the sun porch into an extra bathroom.

'We've all learned to be more friendly with people,' he said. 'Tourists have got to be pampered and entertained like children, and it took us here in Onora Valley a long time to wake up to that fact. I'm on the Entertainment Board for the town and we try to keep visitors occupied so they won't have time to find fault with us. What we've got to do is find a way to keep 'em here after they come.'

When I asked Roger Green at the *Herald* about the town's sudden interest in the tourist trade he said he thought it was a mighty good sign.

'I believe,' he explained, 'that Onora Valley is about the most perfect place for a man who is looking for a new home and hasn't got but a little capital to invest. We offer a person reasonable enough business opportunities for a town our size. For a long time we were mainly an agricultural community and it is only now that we have begun to appeal to the tourists. To me, it is an indication that we are on the threshold of a golden opportunity.

'Because we have been untouched by the commercialism of the popular Florida resorts, we can offer tourists comfortable accommodations at the most reasonable rates to be found in the whole state. The cost of living is lower here. For instance, if a man wants to play golf he can play here on as good a course as there is in Florida at rates not more than half as high as most courses charge. All the little towns in the county are cooperating. We are starting a general advertising campaign to acquaint the millions of people up North with the advantages of Onora County. And I believe we'll be able to make people know a good thing when they see it.

'Already there is a shortage of accommodations and the Chamber of Commerce calls me every afternoon to know if I have heard of any other families willing to take in people for the night. It's getting so you can't find a room in town after six o'clock. People stop for the night, and like the town so well they want to stay. Florida in the wintertime means rest and quiet and sunshine to the older folks driving down. When they get here they are usually tired out from their trip and

the peaceful atmosphere of the town and the view of the river running by out there appeal to them. Then, of course, after they get rested up, they begin looking around for something to do. That's what we are mostly short on right now, but that will all be taken care of in time.

'We have nearly twenty apartment houses in town now, and some of them brand-new. You can count nearly a hundred more furnished apartments in private homes and over people's garages. Half a hundred homes are listed with rooms to rent. There are nearly that many more families who would move out of their houses entirely if they got a chance to rent them for the season. We have hotels, and there are boarding-houses to take care of the tourist who wants to stay awhile and hasn't got but a moderate amount of money to spend on his vacation. The tourist camps on the roads out of here are coining money hand over fist. Why, right below here is the finest cabin court in the whole state of Florida. If you aren't doing anything this afternoon, why don't you run out and look at it? If you've heard as many hotel men as I have complaining that the tourist cabins are ruining their business, you'll understand what they mean when you see how comfortable you could be out there.'

I drove a short way out of town along Route 17 until I came to the tiny village of Colonial cottages in a grove of palm trees. As I drove in, two signs other than the one bidding me welcome caught my eye: 'Do Not Sound Horn In Court After Night' and 'No Locals.'

The owner is a crisp, quick-spoken Canadian who



took time out from his work to show me through the cabins, and they were indeed charming. A dozen of them are painted white, with bright red blinds and a grassy lawn plot.

‘My wife and I were attracted by the central location of Onora Valley and the moderate climate and decided this was the place we were looking for to build. You see, we had to figure where we wanted to spend the rest of our days, because these cabins represent our life savings. We felt that if we liked Onora Valley that much enough other people would like it well enough to help pay back our investment. We can be at the ocean in an hour; we can drive to several fresh-water bathing resorts in less time, and we can visit all the near-by attractions like Silver Springs and Marine Studios.

‘We had been in the tourist cabin business up North, but sold out because of our neighbors. On one side of us there was a roadside assignation camp disguised as a cabin court which catered to taxi trade and locals. I reported them time and again to the police, but even after finding nude girls consorting with the taxi-drivers themselves, the police didn’t do anything about it. On the other side of me was an out-and-out grasper. I had to fight him openly by standing down at the road nights after my cabins were all filled and I’d steer enquiring tourists to any other place I’d know was decent. I got the reputation of having the only decent court in that whole nest of assignation cesspools and my business was flourishing. Then the Hotel Commission got worried about tourist homes generally and tried to suppress us. They couldn’t put us out of business entirely, but they

did bring about legislation restricting us so it was practically impossible to build new courts in desirable locations. The upshot was that my grasper neighbor figured it would be good strategy to buy me out, and I was glad enough to sell. I sold at enough profit to build these cabins here and have a little left over for accidents. I'm running the kind of a cabin court the town wants. I know that, because the paper and the good church-going people recommend me to everybody looking for a place to stay.'

The atmosphere of each cabin was one of cheerful comfort. The Hudson's Bay blankets were a sight for weary eyes. There were gas heaters for chilly nights, thermos bottles of fresh water, and in the bathroom there were new bath mats, spotless towels and soap wrapped in cellophane. Bowls of fresh fruit had been placed on every night table.

'The psychology of the fruit is simple enough,' he explained. 'It makes the guest feel welcome enough to unconsciously realize a personal responsibility in the cabin, and the result is less cigarette burns on the edges of my maple dressers and fewer stains on my fine carpets. Cheap as fruit is here in Florida, I guess it pays for itself a good many times over.'

The cabins are painted ivory and a soft apple green. They have private baths, kitchenettes, sitting rooms, closets, and are furnished completely with everything for a guest to begin cabin-keeping except food in the electric iceboxes.

'My rates are fair enough and of course they are less to parties, or by the month. I don't allow dogs, and I

put rubber spreads over the mattresses to protect them from the natural weaknesses of the children.

'My idea is if you run a dump and play a crooked game, you can't succeed, no matter what business you are in. I realize the reputation tourist camps have generally. I know that some of these combination juke-joints, filling stations and tourist camps are nothing in the world but places for carrying on covered-up red-light trade. There are places within a gunshot of here that cater to the lonesome traveler with town girls. A ten-cent 'phone call will bring as many girls as a fellow feels he can take care of. Some owners keep their girls on farms within a fifteen-minute call from the camp. One fellow told me he figured country air and fresh milk and eggs made a girl last longer than if he kept her cooped up in a stuffy hotel room. Well, sir, you don't find me taking locals. I've been in this business long enough to know all the tricks. I can spot the weary, and the restless. I heard a camp operator say some nights business was so good he could rent his cabins three and four times before day. I'll tell you, I'll have none of the local boys making cat houses out of my cabins. Nobody gets a bed here whose car license is even in the county. I got a trick of walking in front of the cars nights, pretending I've been blinded by the headlights until I get a chance to inspect the license plates.

'If all the camps in the community had as good a reputation as mine, I can tell you about one night when plenty of good would have come of it. Two hairbrained boys from here persuaded two sweet high-school girls

who lived in a town near here to slip out of their rooms late one night and go juking with them. When the boys got enough to drink inside themselves they tried to get the girls to spend the night with them at a tourist camp. But the girls had better sense and when they tried to 'phone their mothers to come after them, the boys shoved them into the back seat of the car and started racing them home. When they reached the drawbridge they were going too fast, the fools, to see it was open and when the frantic mothers went to look for their daughters they found them at the bottom of the river, instead of in their beds where they should have been. Now, what put the idea into the boys' heads? They knew there *were* places they could take the girls, if they had been willing.

'I'd like to be a tourist camp inspector,' he went on, plenty hot under the collar by this time. 'The tip-off for a crooked camp is one where the house is connected to the garage and a man can drive into the garage, close the doors and go into the cabin without being seen. This convenience protects him from having his license plates spotted and saves his girl considerable embarrassment, too. You can spot a guy that isn't on the level. He walks up to the door with a great brave show and insists on paying cash right off without first inspecting the cabins. The girl always refuses to get out of the car, but sits in the dark until she can make a dash from the car to the house. It's an instinctive feeling you get after a while, and you can just feel the heat a fellow throws off when he comes to rent a cabin for assignation purposes.

'Let me give you a few good tips, in case you ever decide you want to retire to operating a cabin court.'

He and I were pals by this time. The kind of camaraderie that comes of discussing other folk's sins long enough.

'Never put your name on the ash-trays and soap dishes. Makes souvenirs out of them. People don't consider it stealing to take souvenirs, either. I have reduced stealing to the minimum. Make people give you their name, address, of course, and then take their car registration. People can change their names, but they can't change their license numbers. If I miss anything next morning after they drive off, I call the police down below here and tell them that such and such a car, bearing such and such a number, spent the night here and since they have gone I miss this blanket, or that reading-lamp and will they stop the car and investigate. Then I get into my car and race down to wherever the police have found them on the road and bring back the article if they've got it, or, of course, apologize pretty fast if they haven't.

'I've sunk a lot of money here under these palms,' he told me as I got up to go, 'and I expect to get it all back, and then some. If a man's got a nice place and looks out for it, he's bound to win.'

I was so intrigued with all my new knowledge on the inside workings of the tourist camp business that I made up my mind to spend the night in one the first chance I got. Several days later I made a trip down-state and in the afternoon before dark I began trying to spot a place where I thought I might be safe from the milk-fed

blondes. Sure enough, you could almost tell the worst ones. Cheap brick affairs perched on scrub-oak knolls. Wooden shacks clustered around dingy filling stations. Brightly painted rows of cabins, courts, camps, rests, roosts, havens, homes, haunts, inns, lodges and villas specializing in hot showers, hot breakfasts, boating, bathing, fishing, Beautyrests, electric fans, children's playgrounds, free parking, picnic tables and sight-seeing service. I finally selected one to my taste. I think it was the miniature cypress garden that decided me. That, and the fact that the garages were not attached to the cabins.

The cabins were all different. There was a Spanish bungalow, a Chinese house, a Colonial mansion in miniature, a Cape Cod, two moderns, a plain, ordinary cottage, and one was a copy of a movie actor's beach house. I chose the Colonial mansion in miniature.

The owner told me where he got his ideas for the various styles of architecture. He saw a picture of one house on a blotter; two ideas came from magazines; one, off a calendar, and one is a copy of the electric light building in Lakeland.

'The secret of my good repeat business is the fact that I make my guests feel like this place is their home while they're away from their own. I've been operatin' a year now, an' I've never had a thing stolen from me. Not even the pieces of bric-a-brac you see there on the bureaus. We don't take in any locals, an' we've got such a reputation as a fine honeymoon place that we get a lot of new couples. We make 'em show their marriage licenses, though. I had one man come to spend a night an' he stayed ten weeks. Hope you'll do the same.

'We don't take drunks, an' the only drunk we ever had got that way after we let him in. He cost us the only accident we've had since we started operatin', and it wasn't him then, it was his dog,' and he pointed mournfully to a dark spot on the rug.

'We have to take dogs in because so many nice folks travel with 'em these days. I ain't got much to say about the folks themselves, but we sure get some mighty funny pooches.'

I assured him his place was by far the most prosperous-looking one I had seen since I left Onora Valley. I asked him what he thought was the key to success in the tourist camp business. After a thoughtful moment he said, 'I guess there is more money in beds than in living-rooms.' I thought that made sense.

On my way back to Onora Valley the next day I pulled into a roadside filling station and blew for service. Presently a girl in a shiny black dress and red bedroom slippers came out. When I asked her to fill the tank with gas she looked at me a moment in amazement. Finally she grasped the gas-hose, taking great care not to break her red-lacquered fingernails, and drawled in saccharine tones, 'Are you suah gas is what you *really* want?'

# part three



*I Have Been Home Again*







# twelve

## *Everything's Going To Be All Right*

IT's winter again along the river road, and the fields down towards White Hall and Cousin Evelyn's house wear their winter tones of brown and gray.

If I could stand now at Moss Hill Filling Station and look down over the valley, I'd see cheerful smoke pouring out of Cousin Evelyn's chimney. It's about supper time down there. The lamps are lit. Cousin Evelyn is in the kitchen. Jeanette is studying her lessons in front of the fire and Bertha Mae is sitting in the corner, listening to the radio.

Braxton and Herndon, the two younger boys, have been called away in the draft, but Earl is in the back lot feeding up the stock. Presently Mr. Jasper will come stomping in to the fire, his hands red and raw from trying to thaw the barnyard pump.

I wish I could be there to sit down with them to their supper of fresh sausage and hot grits and sweet potatoes.

In White Hall, Mrs. Murvin is just about to sit down alone to her supper in the big house.

Down the river road a piece, Lonnie Smith can't take his eyes off his young wife long enough to eat.

It's supper time in the South.

Down in Florida, Turner is making his way along soggy Sawdust Avenue in Sawmill Quarters carrying brother Allen his supper. Tonight, all of Onora County's underprivileged children will go to sleep with the wrinkles out of their bellies — Miss Sophia has seen to that — and on a full stomach Uncle John can dream his dream of chopping Christians.

The sweetish smell of frying fish and cooking collard greens lures the weary mill hands home to their kitchens in Hickory Nut Hill. It's about time for the boys who have been sitting around the stove in the back of the Crystal Barber Shop all afternoon to get up and stretch themselves and say they 'believed they'd knock off an' go home.'

Well, I have been home again. I did not actually take off my shoes and walk barefooted, but in my heart I know the feel of the earth again. I have recaptured the smell of broom sedge burning in the fields and the smell of the mists rising out of the yellow river. I know again the quiet joy of passing the time of day with a friend, and I have retuned my ear to the sound of long-remembered voices. I have been home again and I have been a part of the pleasant confusion of a small-town Saturday afternoon. I have sat in the family pew on Sunday mornings, listening to the Baptist minister plead with his congregation to return to prayer, drowsily meditating on nothing at all, or speculating how long it will be before the pulpit mural of 'Jesus on the Mount of Olives' finally flakes away entirely.

It's supper time down home, down South, and it's dinner time in New York. I straighten my bow tie and slip a flower into my buttonhole, for it is to be an evening of theatre and party. But before I go down to the grill room, I pick up a letter on my desk at the Lambs Club and as I glance through it again, the Broadway lights dim to the memory of a setting Florida sun. It is from Miss Sophia. She thought I would like to know that the 'crazy Pearsalls' are getting along all right. Lillian has had her tonsils out and is able to spend more days in school now. Bert is working regularly as a Western Union boy, and Addie Belle is engaged to marry her dime-store manager. She sees him two nights a week now, at home.

'In this work,' Miss Sophia writes on, in philosophic mood, 'you start out with all the enthusiasm in the world. You're going to raise people's standards of living, straighten out their problems, help them get on their feet and become self-sustaining and self-respecting. Every family is a new job for you. That's how I felt when I finished college and started out on my rounds in Onora County.

'You come home *one* day, delighted and happy, thrilled with everything you have accomplished. "My plan worked — they bought the house I suggested they look at. They have moved, the neighborhood is better, the children's health is improving, they are going to school more regularly, doing better work." The *next* day is different. "I hate myself. I'm a low-down detective. Why did I do it? Well, the rascal had no right to misrepresent things. Why did he say he

owned no property, when all the time he had deeded the store to his wife and she was collecting the rent? Yes, I'm glad I found out." But you're not, really. He is blind and old and she isn't very nice to him. Dishonest, yes, but why? You did your duty, but you hate yourself for it. Then the following day there is a different story again. She left the county home, so full of hope, so clean, and almost well. Going back to her family with an income — a grant — something to help with. Sick again, in all that filth, but never complaining. You wonder. "Worse off, yes, but happier, perhaps."

'You can't make people over. Eventually, you learn to accept them as they are. This understanding becomes a little clearer with each family you work with. You can't relax. You keep on trying. A thousand times a year you think, "Oh, what's the use? I'll quit. They'll give the job to someone who can do it better." That's true, of course, but all your friends, your poor families, they trust you, and somehow that seems so important.'

The future of Onora Valley lies with its young men. One of the most progressive of these is the new president of the bank. I got to know him well on my visit back home. We used to talk a lot about the shape of things to come in Onora Valley and there was a long, thoughtful letter in the afternoon mail.

'Our community, as you know, depends entirely upon agriculture,' he wrote. 'Cities and towns which draw their main source of income from the growing and marketing of farm products are usually backward and have many ups and downs — mostly downs.'

'The Florida boom was over before I moved here, but the effects of easy credit during that period, together with unscrupulous bankers and politicians who handled the finances of the city government during the boom and wasted the taxpayers' money, practically ruined not only the credit of the city but also many of the business men and farmers.

'Being the new banker in town and, incidentally, the only banker in the city and county, I was quite a curio. You can well appreciate this when you realize that several bankers in town have served time in the penitentiary for their questionable banking operations in three or four previously closed banks. It was not long before all the people knew me, for all they had to do was look in the front door and there I sat.

'Our ten thousand population is about equally divided between white and colored. The majority of the white men are farmers and, within a short period of time, I met most of them and also the merchants. These people had gone through two very trying periods: first, the closing of all banks in the city and county (we are the oldest bank and have been in operation only thirteen years); and, second, the collapse of the Florida boom.

'Nine out of every ten that I met, immediately after acknowledging the introduction would say, "You know, we are glad to welcome you here," and then they would pause and continue, "Not so many years ago I could walk into the bank and without filing a personal financial statement or putting up security, discount my note for five thousand dollars." In some cases it was as high as ten thousand dollars.

'One of the bankers who had served time in jail actually mailed blank notes to customers, inviting them to fill in the amount, bring them to the bank and get the money, in order, I suppose, to cover some of his questionable operations in his handling of city finances.

'Needless to say, easy credit such as this helped close the banks. Many innocent depositors received as little as one and one half per cent of their deposits after final liquidation of one of the banks, while other closed banks paid as much as fifty-eight per cent. Many who borrowed funds from these same banks have to this day never paid anything on their notes.

'The final result of all this in our community, as I see it, is that for many years our municipal debt will be so heavy that progress will be very slow.

'Perhaps more important than that is, that easy credit has become so ingrained in the minds of the people that it will take at least fifty years before this can be wiped out, and the principles of sound credit understood and practiced by the younger generation.'

Pertinent documents on two phases of small-town life in the South, these comments from Miss Sophia and my banker friend, but there was another letter on my desk that disturbed me; a letter from a friend of mine who moved away from Onora Valley — one of the 'younger generation.'

'For seven long years while I was with the Chamber of Commerce in Onora Valley, we worked desperately to push the town forward, and much was accomplished, too, yet somehow it just seemed we were licked on a lot of things before we ever got started, because we did not

have the interest of a certain group or because that group positively did not want a project to go through and therefore blocked it. Onora Valley is a very factional town, and it looks like the various groups never will get together for the good of all. One faction doesn't want progress, for it is afraid the change will cost them, and anyway they are satisfied with conditions just as they are.

'Another group is the one that will work eagerly for a project, provided personal benefits will accrue to a few — benefits to the town and citizenry being purely incidental.

'There is little wonder that some people in Onora Valley have given up hope of the town ever growing, and bolstering the morale of those folks is the most important job to be done. Only last night I had a rather successful young man tell me that he was sick of the whole set-up in Onora Valley and that he was resigning from his civic club, and getting out of everything. The prevailing attitude is "Let George do it," and it is mighty depressing.

'Nothing can be done without money — and, of course, fortitude of people — and for some reason or other, officials of Onora Valley and Onora County don't seem to realize that. Money makes money, and so long as mere letters are written for government projects, or seeking new industries, what can be expected? The places that are growing *go* after those things.

'I guess that maybe I am one of the quitters, for I too gave up. When I was offered a job with the Atlantic Coast Line, I felt I couldn't afford to turn it down, for



even though I loved Chamber of Commerce work, I couldn't see a future of solid accomplishment. I'm starting all over again. But, now that it's done, I'm mighty glad.

'Honestly, Sam, I don't know what the next few years hold in store for Onora Valley, for it all depends on what the home folks do — Heaven knows there is everything to do about it.'

Well, as an adopted son, I don't give Onora Valley up, not by a long sight. In North Carolina a score of years ago, the strawberry center of the country moved thirty miles down the road. The move wrecked many fortunes, but today, the old, depleted berry soil produces the finest tobacco and truck crops in the East. The sight of dozens of wagons and trucks lined up along the streets to the auction shed, waiting turns for their loads of melons and vegetables to be sold to buyers from the Northern markets, is not one of depression. The machine-gun tempo of the auctioneer's tongue is music of prosperity to the farmer's ears. Places change and prices vary and crops rotate, but I have faith that some day when John Donley's boy grows up, he will be the new carrot king, or maybe the iceberg lettuce king of Onora Valley and in his address from the courthouse steps at the Farmers' Festival he will reecho Mr. Whitner's warning of 1909 to 'never let us again put all our eggs in one basket.'

Gordon Cherry was my lanky, good-natured cousin who died too young. He went away from home for a few years to work. After he came back to stay, he and

Henry Aaron used to sit in front of Lip Long's drug-store downtown and study their minds and talk. Gordon spoke of Henry affectionately as 'Bumper.' Then one day Bumper died.

Gordon had a green thumb. He liked to dig around in the garden and make things grow. He planted the tulips along the drive and nourished the azaleas and pruned the flowering quince. Times, he'd sit on the curbing around the cemetery lot, to see that William Henry, the gardener, was trimming the grass on the graves properly. The Aaron lot was near-by, and every now and then he'd get up and go over and look down at Henry's grave and say, 'Get up from there, Bumper, and let's talk.'

Gordon was my mother's favorite. When he died, and the Cherry lot was so full there wasn't room left on it for him, he was buried over there with her, with a space left between them for me. And when I go home to stay, I'll settle down there under the peaceful maples beside them, with the winds from the fields sighing over us, and through eternity, we'll talk. It's the besetting sin of the South, maybe, the small town anyway; too much talk and too little do. But it's comforting. And I think maybe some day we'll do more than talk.

THE END











